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OUT OF THE ATOMFIRE

FEATURE NOVEL

by Bryce Walton
& Ross Rocklynne

HONORABLE ENEMIES

FEATURE NOVELET

by Poul Anderson

THE AWFUL WEAPON

by Alfred Coppel

MIND OF TOMORROW

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FUN CAN LAST FOREVER

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FUTURE

Robert W.
Lowndes,
Editor

combined with **SCIENCE FICTION** *stories*

Volume 2

May, 1951

Number 1

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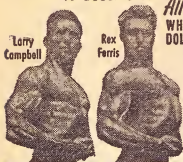
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"There was a slight distortion in the air, and Phaon was falling..."

Out of the Atomfire

Feature Novel of Worlds to Come
by Bryce Walton & Ross Rocklynne

"They think we're animals with no human drives or courage! . . . All of us know what a small chance I have of succeeding. I can only try to pass as one of them, and bring you back the atomfire metal in such quantity that we can all live again!"



WHEN THE two Atom Guard Officers returned to their gyrocar, they were shocked to find it grounded. In their gold and black uniforms they walked round and round the ship, examining it. Its silver hull glowed with perfection in the moonlight, but it wouldn't respond to the controls.

They had gone on a brief survey trip through the ruined plains city, twenty minutes ago. The ship had functioned perfectly, then; atometal machinery always functioned perfectly.

They turned and looked at each other, puzzled. "No power at all; no

spark," one of them said. "That's never happened before."

The wind sighed through the ruined stones of the city. From far across the desert a plains wolf howled. "It's happened now," the other answered. He took the rayburner from its holster and peered into the shadows of the ruins. "Something has been here."

"Marcius!" the other said. "Are you implying that a plainsdog—?"

"No. They're not intelligent enough, of course; besides, they fear us. There probably isn't a plainsdog within ten leagues of us this minute. But something has taken a vital part from this machine. That demands intelligence. I don't know—"

Their voices carried to Phaon where he waited behind the crumbled wall. He looked quickly to either side. The other plainsdogs were ready. Crantor, the Leader, had re-

One of the most common illusions of idealists has been the belief that scientific "progress" could and would create a new Golden Age of peace, prosperity for all, etc. If a power-source, common enough and cheap enough to supply all humanity could be found, such persons have reasoned, then no one need want. But history shows that whenever science has discovered anything "free", men have learned how to unfree it in short order . . .

moved a couple of small but important gadgets from the gyrocar's engine. The other plainsdogs waited in the shadows for the signal.

Crantor gripped Phaon's arm. "We have to strike now," he whispered. "They've signaled the City; someone will be coming out here to pick them up any time now."

Phaon nodded. He looked at the old man's body and the sight sickened him, strengthened the primary motivations of revenge within him. It was the contrast to his own body that sickened him. By contrast to these other shriveled, diseased bodies he was like a god. But he didn't feel like a god.

He felt like a man getting ready to die. He didn't like that feeling, and the thought of killing was as repulsive to him as the thought of dying. But, Phaon had to kill. All his life he had known that the time would come when he must kill. For a man who worshipped life, it would not be easy.

Crantor put a hand like a claw over his lips to stop the hacking cough.

Phaon turned away, ran his hands the length of a rusty metal bludgeon. The feel of it was good; he liked the feel of iron and stones and the touch of wind at night on his skin. He loved life and all of its manifestations, down to the most insignificant details. He liked to hear things—the voices of children who didn't know they would never live to be adults; the sound of water running over stones; the whispers of women's voices.

Living in the shadow of constant dying had not inured him to death. Rather he had grown to regard life as precious beyond price, and even the death of a tiny insect could fill Phaon's tall powerful body with the emotional agony of a child.

To these starving, dying plainspeople he was a kind of god, a superman, a legend, an immortal. Instead, he was the only one among them who had received the benefit of the atom-fire metal in such quantities that he was now, in appearance, like the city dwellers, like the Life-Givers—like

these two Atom Guard Officers who waited so uneasily to die.

If he were a god, it would be better, Phaon thought; his chances of success would then be something above zero. He would not be afraid either. These people who had sacrificed themselves, that he might grow to appear like the Life-Givers, didn't know he felt fear. He was afraid, with the provincial's fear of the unknown beyond the plains. Afraid of the cold emotionless character of the Life-Givers against whom he would be pitted. Afraid of this moment when he must leave all familiar things.

"They think we're animals," Crantor whispered. "With no human drives or courage. If you can't get into the Iron Atom and bring back the atomfire for us—at least show them that a plainsman can have courage, that he is human."

The woman crawled up to him and put her fingers on his arm. Her eyes were fevered and abnormally bright, the only thing about her skeletal body that seemed alive. When Phaon held her tightly it was like an illusion, like holding a breath of drifting wind. "Thala, go back somewhere out of danger."

Around him the shadows took form, countless small individual shapes and tiny fingers caressed his back and legs. His throat was dry as he looked at the children. They were all around him, all bright eyes and heads too big for their starving bodies. "Phaon, Phaon," they whispered. "Don't go away from us. Who will play with us, who will run with us over the desert at night? Who will catch the wild horse for us? Who will help us build castles out of white sand?"

He scooped them into him with a circular movement of his arm. "I will," he whispered thickly. "I'll be back in a little while. Keep your sand castles built. Don't let the wind blow them away."

To Thala, he said. "Take the kids back, back behind the wailing wall. Don't let them see, or hear. Take them down to the riverbed to their castles of sand."

He watched them move back, their eyes fixed in awe and love fading and going out one by one in the dark.

Crantor tossed the stone and at the signal, Phaon leaped over the wall. Forms flowed with him through the scummed pools. Their feeble cries were like echoes of a former defiance.

A corpse seemed to have risen from its grave to speak dead courage.

SICKNESS STRUCK HARD at Phaon with the bone-shattering crunch of the bludgeon. A ray-burner glinted from the hand of the officer known as Marcius, as the other officer fell dead at his feet. There wasn't time to leap that space; Phaon swung the bludgeon in an arc, released it. It thudded on the guard's chest and Phaon came in fast, his muscles moving instinctively. Hate momentarily buried his revulsion as he struck blindly with balled fists.

Then the Guard lay there very dead on the sand, his face battered to a red smear. The bodies were dragged away, buried. Phaon stood there dressed in the uniform of the Guard called Marcius. He felt imprisoned in the tight-fitting plastisilk; his feet were too big for the boots; he hated the feel of clothes over him, and already he missed the caress of the wind on his bare skin.

From the packet at his waist he withdrew the identification of the dead man. "*Orthas Marcius.*" he read aloud. "*Department of Distribution. Atometals IV. Capitol City.*"

He glanced from face to face, over fevered eyes and ribbed bodies. They were showing a tinge of fear of him. *And why not, he thought? I look like a Life-Giver.* Thala came up to him, her eyes wet.

He put an arm around her and said to all of them, "All of us know what a small chance I have of succeeding. I can tell you only that I'll do all I can possibly do to bring you back the atomfire metal in such quantity that all of you will grow to look as I look tonight. And that the kids will live and grow too."

Quickly he turned away from

them, walked with Thala and Crantor to the other side of the gyrocar. Behind him, he heard the others dispersing, fading into the ruins where the damp catacombs would receive them like a tomb for hiding.

It was just as well they didn't see him now; it would not be good for a god to show sentiment, for a legend to have tears in its eyes. Thala said, "Goodbye, Phaon," and then she left him, too.

Crantor said. "The Guards will be here in a minute, Phaon. The lights of a gyrocar are coming in fast right now. See! Phaon—the atomfire burns a likeness into all human bodies. The blonde and dark-haired types are about the only real physical distinction. You can pass for Orthas Marcius a little while. Whatever you do, though, you'll have to do quickly; your masquerade won't last long."

Crantor faded back. He began to cough. It seemed to Phaon that it was the cough, not the man, who became a part of the shadows.



BEING subordinates, they did not question his orders nor question him at all. He told them to take him to his quarters and that he would make a personal report to the Commandant within an hour.

Phaon stood there by the gravledge of his apartment after they had dropped him through the opaque dome of the City, saluted and left him. In body, he fitted this brilliant City of the Life-Givers, but no one could have felt more lost, more alien. The Life-Givers had achieved personal immortality, or something near it. There were no children playing in these streets. Everywhere the atomfire suns hung suspended, giving out their rays of life-giving flame. The towering, power-hung buildings of atometal brought up the trail of size from the depths of the Iron Atom, were like steely fingers wrapping

around him. The air seemed suffocating; Phaon missed the great expanses of free desert country.

The tight-fitting uniform itched his skin. Except for the days spent in that cave, under the atomfire, Phaon had been a man of constant physical action. For hours he ran at night across the desert, feeling the exhilaration of blood pumping fast, the expanding and contracting of his lungs. He had lived deliberately to feel the full significance of life.

This City didn't have the qualities of life as he had dreamed of it; it was static. It had decayed, or rather frozen up in a kind of sterile, metallic beauty without a soul of its own. The people, all god-like, seemed inhuman. Judged by his standards, they weren't human.

He walked about the vast apartment with its interior gardens, his hands moist. He bumped against things, unaccustomed to the restriction of enclosed space. The apartment was filled with gadgets, their purposes were to stimulate emotions. Substitutes for genuine living. Couches for dreaming. Mechanical and chemical opiates. These people had forgotten how really to live. Their only adventures, excitements, or most of them, apparently were subjective.

Phaon thought of himself as a barbarian, a savage. A brain filled with incredible knowledge of atomic structures, but the emotional love of life of a primitive. These City dwellers lived and played as gods, oblivious to the disease and extinction ravaging the plains; they were little more, actually, than sense enslaved robots in which all humanity had died.

He looked out of the wide curved panes of atomglass. According to Crantor's chart of the City, the building that harbored the gateway in and out of the depths of the Iron Atom was in the heart of the City. Presently he saw it, a single spire rising to the top of the dome's center like a spindle upon which the City rotated.

Nothing about the City was indigenous to Earth; everything was a

result of exploitation of the Iron Atom, even life itself. How could Phaon, in his role of Orthas Marcus, gain access to that building; pierce the gateway via a freight ship and down the trail of size into the Iron Atom? Perhaps there was a legal way. Being a high-ranking AG Officer—

He turned with studied slowness, hiding any spontaneous emotion, as the door opened.

The woman closed the door behind her. She wasn't anything like Thala; that was Phaon's first reaction. She had flesh on her bones. In his dreams he had seen such women; in dreams he had imagined what Thala would be like, had she been granted the atomfire as had this woman.

She said. "You were to call me as soon as you got back, Marcus. Trying to avoid me?"

He knew nothing of Orthas Marcus' personal life, but playing dumb would only arouse her suspicions. The challenge had come too soon, and he was totally unprepared for such vast and rapid adjustment as the situation required.

Phaon's throat constricted as he stared silently; she shifted with impatience. She wore a red cloak. A green tiara shone from hair so black it was almost purple. On her cloak was the flaming-sun insignia of the Managerial Elite Class that ruled the City; her breastplates were in the shape of the insignia. A descendant of the first humans to be transformed by the atomfires.

"You act strangely, Martius. I called the Commandant. He told me about your experience; sounds possible that plainsdogs could have molested your gyro!"

He mumbled something. Was she his lover, his wife, his—what would he do in any case?

"Why don't you say something, Marcus? You seem—changed somehow."

He took a quick step. One blow would stun her, give him a chance to try to reach the building in which was the gateway. She evidently mistook his intentions; she threw her arms around him, kissed him. The

kiss went deep and he felt his hands against her warm shoulder blades, pulling her tightly against him. Her lips parted. Her head went back and her eyes closed and color flushed her cheeks.

He looked into her eyes and it was as if he looked into a book that was forbidden to him because of hidden secrets. He hated himself then; he loathed himself. He had acted instinctively and he hated what he had done. But he had to go on with it because surely Marcus would have.

She stepped away from him. "Marcus! What's the *matter* with you?"

Lamely, he said. "I guess I'm just not—myself."

Warily, she retreated, suspicious now. From beneath her cloak she withdrew a small plastoid packet, and from that an opaque cube. It began to live, coiling with tendrils of colored light. "Don't move," she whispered tensely. "Now I see it! You were thinking of—of striking me! Say nothing. Don't move. I'll have guards here in a second if you try anything!"

DESPERATE, SICK WITH A feeling of self-inadequacy and failure, Phaon wiped his mouth, flexed his fingers. Before he had even started, he was found out! Thousands had died to give him this chance. The kids playing in the moonlight because they could not stand the Sun, would die because he had failed.

He stood there, frozen by panic, perspiring with indecision, rooted by a multitude of fears.

He had learned about all, or most, of the artifacts of the City. He knew what the cube was. *A thought-wave analyzer and crystallizer!*

She slowly licked her lips as she stepped back and the color ran from her face like dye. "Marcus, not you! You—an afflicted one! I dropped my affair with Perphredo, Commander of the Guards within the Atom, because I felt his mind was too near the edge of insanity. Now you—"

He wanted to get out of there, wanted to run and hide somewhere.

He was totally in the dark. He felt blind, groping and stumbling. And she was saying. "I never realized it could happen to one so close to me. Especially *you!*"

He didn't say anything. He just looked at her.

"Suffering from hallucinations, all kinds of insane delusions. Poor, poor Marcus. Why, you simply can't believe that you're one of the—*plainsdogs!* No one could be that insane!"

He felt his fingers curl. He moved a step toward her and said softly. "Tell me, what do I think?"

She told him, told him all the things he already knew. Coming from her the words were only final evidence of his failure. And to her, such an attitude as his could only be interpreted as the delusions of insanity:

The plainspeople sacrificing themselves, dying, giving up the little scraps of atometal they possessed to Phaon so that he might bathe in its collective fire and grow to be like the Life-Givers. The plainspeople had never been allotted enough by the City to live like human beings, but only to survive, maintaining a bare minimal level of existence by insufficient granuals of atomfire metal.

Crantor had started the idea and Phaon's body, beginning at the age of nine, had begun to grow to magnificence under the atomfire.

She stared at Phaon. "If you really believe that, and that you're not Marcus at all but someone named Phaon—then you're really mad! Who is this Crantor? What figment of nightmare is he?"

He didn't say anything; she gazed into the cube. "You're insane," she said in a whisper, "yet you know more about atomic structures and the world of the Iron Atom than anyone I've ever ran up against. And you believe you got this vast information from a plainsdog named Crantor?"

Even more incredible must she find the story of Crantor. His father, Thanus, had fled to the plains after the Managerials and the Military had taken over his discoveries.

Thanus had died, a bitter disillusioned man, watching the revolution and oppression, slavery and death ushered in by his discoveries. But his secrets—his vast knowledge of the Iron Atom and nuclear physics—hadn't died with him. Crantor had learned that.

But Crantor had been helpless to act. Earth had been burned to a lifeless husk by the atom wars. There were no technical facilities remaining for exploitation with which to duplicate the atom-reducing machines in the City of the Life-Givers. The City had taken over control of the Atom-Reducer, the gateway in and out of the depths of the Iron Atom. For only from the Iron Atom could life be brought to a dead Earth.

And only those who controlled that gateway could control and maintain any life on Earth that by all logic should have become lifeless long ago.

SHE LOOKED UP FROM THE thought-analyzer and sighed helplessly. "I don't know where you really got all this incredible information, Marcius. But you're certainly afflicted with the mental disease that took Molus a week ago. Marcius, don't you know what will happen to you when they find out?"

He didn't know; he didn't know anything. Phaon looked past her, through the window. Even there he saw nothing symbolizing the freedom he worshiped. Light refracted back to him by heights of harshly gleaming atometals. And he thought: *In another few weeks, Thala will be dead. Buried under drifting sand where no one will remember. The kids will watch the wind blow the sand-castles down layer by layer. One by one they will go to sleep anticipating a sunrise they will never see.*

It was strange, but then he thought of dissociated things; of the cold waterfall in the mountains; of the wild horses that ran the desert over the slopes where the mountains began to rise. He thought of their wild freedom, the wind-thrill of the rides through cool evenings with

laughing children held in his arms, and the hooves thundering a song of freedom-lost.

Of all the wild things, only the horse and the dog remained. Those animals that remained near enough to human beings to benefit from the atomfire metals.

"Marcius—they'll operate on your higher brain centers and send you down into the Iron Atom to work until you die in the atometal mines! Don't you know that? There's no cure for the affliction, no known cure. That's what they do! Surely you remember that!"

He thought, *if there isn't a chance, then I'd rather die now and get it over with.* But she anticipated his lunge, probably by the thought-analyzer. She dodged out of his way and he twisted, lunged again. She had a small metal tube in her hand. He heard nothing, saw only a slight distortion in the air before him; but the nucleonic power sent him writhing helplessly to the floor.

He kept on trying to move toward her, but his legs would no longer function. His heart, his mind, they moved, but his body seemed dead. With him in that room were ghosts who tried to help him, to lift him out of his prison. Crantor and Thala and men and women and a band of children, they took his hands and tried to lift him, their shrill cries urging him.

Sweat ran down his face. The tremendous effort of will seemed to burst in his veins. His head fell upon his arms. Dimly he heard her voice. "Though I'm a woman of the Managerial House of Deucalion, I couldn't keep you from being sentenced, Marcius. Your affliction is so deep that you don't even remember my name. I'm Rhea, remember? Rhea. Because I love you, and because of your amazing knowledge which may be useful, I'm going to try and help you. Maybe you won't die, Marcius."

He tried to rise up against her, against the enclosing darkness. And his last memory of that place was trying to move, to move against a goal that was lost.



PHAON HAD been a dreamer. He had dreamed of simple beauty. Of a green world of the future where there was no sickness or disease or death. Of people who laughed. Of people who loved quietly in shaded forests where there had never been pain. Of simple beauty in houses hidden away in quiet shade, or blending with distant mountainsides where children played and grew to loveliness, and where the future glowed only with promise.

When he was five he had found a small brackish lake. He had not known the water was poison. He had built a small raft and would have sailed out on this lake to his death had not Crantor caught him and prevented this action just in time.

"I'll call you Phaon," Crantor had said. "Phaon the boatman who was made handsome by a goddess and beloved in vain by another."

He had always dreamed, and now as he opened his eyes, Phaon thought he was experiencing his last dream. He was looking through curved glass at a landscape and a sky that could not be real. But then, he thought, it was too fantastic even to be a dream.

And in no dream would he deliberately imprison himself in a pressure-suit. Freedom, freedom from all physical encumbrances had been the motif of all his dreams. A pressure suit was the ultimate in restriction, an insular world in which even the air was a precious commodity.

And then as he looked around him, a thrill went through him like a cold chill, a thrill mingled with fear and the feeling of being lost forever in incomputable immensity.

Somehow, he had been sent down the trail of size.

He was in the world of the Iron Atom!

Alien, yet he felt more at home here than in the City. From Thanus and Crantor, he had acquired more

knowledge of the Iron Atom than of Earth. It was the Iron Atom that had given Earth the will to live.

This was his goal, the goal of his life. But he had no idea how he had gotten here.

He was sitting on the fire-fly surface of a great hurtling photon. A light-photon. And a quick glance at the 'solar system' around him indicated that he must be somewhere beyond the orbit of Electron Six.

"Marcius!"

He turned. The voice came from a small speaker inside his transparent atometal helmet, distorted to a kind of animal whine. He was equipped with an etheradio receiver, the only kind that would work in this atmosphere.

"Marcius, get up! Get on your feet!"

The urgency in the voice exaggerated his own uncertainty. He had never felt that he really *belonged* anywhere, and the only certainty about life had been only a panicky certainty of himself. Right now he was beginning to doubt his own existence. The world of the Iron Atom had been familiar enough, in theory. In actuality, it seemed impossible that he should be here. The greatest pleasure he had ever gotten from life had been a dive into the cold water of a small falls in the foothills. He thought of that now. Of the ecstasy of standing under a cold shower. The thought afforded a sense of reality, now, of being—*somewhere*.

He got up. He saw the ship then on the rounded short-lived horizon of the 500-foot, bullet-shaped photon. Beyond the ship was the atomsky—blazing stars and dazzling confusions of nebulae which were distant atoms and even more distant molecular galaxies.

The voice said. "In a few minutes, Perphredo's Guards will be here to take you. They're pursuing this photon. I can escape, but you can't; not without my help. In other words, I dumped you out here so that I might strike a bargain with you."

"Unless I know how I got down here into the Iron Atom," Phaon said. "And unless I know a little

of what this is all about, I'm going to sit back down again, close my eyes and surrender myself to fate."

"You were smuggled into the Iron Atom in a crate marked *Machinerv*," she said impatiently. "I dropped my ship down and spirited you out of the freight depot under the very shocked noses of the Guards. The analyzer says you're Orthas Marcius, but who you are here and now means nothing to me. You have information about atomic structure we Rebels have to have. I want that information—now! And either I get it, or you'll be taken by the AG Guards."

"Did you say Rebels?" Phaon asked. He looked around him, slowly. He saw no sign of pursuit, but there was a ring of sincerity in the voice.

"This is hardly the place or time to discuss the history of the Iron Atom," the voice said sharply. "But being insane, you probably know nothing at all about it. Anyway, there are Rebels here. Not many of them are left, they're hunted constantly. We're dedicated to finding a free way out of the Iron Atom, and thereby breaking the control of the AG Guards over the Iron Atom, and over the Earth as well; whoever controls that bottleneck controls life itself. We want that control. According to the analyzer, you also want to find a freeway in and out of the Atom. I have information you have to have. You have to have information that I'm willing to give you. Will you bargain? And in any condition, if I leave you here for the Guards to pick up, you'll be through."

That there had been a revolution among the Life-Givers was incredible to Phaon. But the fact that there were others here seeking to find a freeway in and out of the Atom gave him no comfort. The Rebels would be of the same stock as those now in control. Merely a fight for power, and the plainsdogs would be plainsdogs and dying still regardless of such a shift in authority.

As he tried to figure out what he should do, he saw the streaks of fire of approaching ships.

••• **M**ARCIUS! DO YOU know what capture means? I have an auxiliary cruiser here. It's yours if you'll make this bargain with me. You'll have to have a ship. You're here illegally; you have no credits, no food or water. Your air is running out; your mind is abnormal. When they get you, you'll go to the atometal mines, and you'll die there. Of course that won't worry you, because after they're through with your brain, nothing will worry you anymore!"

Phaon stood on that hurtling light-photon as it rushed out into the atomvoid. It occurred to him to wonder if he could get a cold shower in the atometal mines. "How do you know I'll keep my part of the bargain? Or that you have anything I want to know. How do I know you'll keep your part of the bargain?"

"You haven't much of a choice," the voice said. "However, the analyzer shows that you'll keep your promise. And I'll give you my information first. Meanwhile, from the position of those AG ships, you have about five minutes to make a decision."

"I've made the decision already," Phaon said quickly. "Open the air-lock!"

A few minutes later the ship was plunging out through the atomvoid. Already the pursuing ships were far behind, shooting outward on another tangent, continuing to follow the photon.

Phaon, free of his pressure-suit, stood in the small control chamber. He watched the woman at the controls, followed the sure, deft movements of her slim and capable body and he admired that movement as he did all things that were vitally alive, that were healthily conscious of being alive. He breathed deeply, ran his hands over the smooth metallic texture of the rounded walls. He tensed his muscles, let them relax slowly, feeling the intense pleasure of his own aliveness.

If people who took the fact of existence so casually only knew the indescribable pleasure of simply being.

And then she turned slowly; her cool eyes studied him. He wasn't very surprised to find that it was Rhea of the House of Deucalion. A vague familiarity had cushioned his reaction so that he was spared surprise.

She said nothing at first. She was dressed differently now, more practically. Not designed to appeal primarily to a man's senses. She wore a tight, form-fitting black uniform and the sun-insignia of the House of Deucalion was not visible.

He remembered the kiss, of course; it wasn't something you forgot. He took an involuntary step toward her, stopped. Her cold imperious face stopped him like a wall.

He swore at himself, hated himself as a kind of traitor to his kind. She was the essence of all he was dedicated to fight against, and to hate. Her family, the House of Deucalion, had ruled the City and the Atom for longer than one cared to remember. It was under her rule that the atom-fire had been restricted to use by only the select few, and the others of the plains doomed to die slowly, to become plainsdogs, scorned as sub-human, as animals hardly deserving life at all.

He took another step and touched her shoulders. Her eyes darkened for an instant, but then when he made no further movement, she pulled away from him.

"Marcius," she said, "let's have an initial understanding. Your idea that you're a plainsdog, somehow transformed into a human being, is a kind of intolerable insanity; it sickens me. I don't want to discuss it anymore. We both want to find the free way in and out of the Iron Atom and that seems to be the only thing we have in common now. Let's keep it that way."

"The difference," he said slowly, "between a human and a plainsdog is a matter of atomfire. Your Managerial clan restricted it to your own use; now you blame the plainsdogs for a condition your class brought about by their own insane greed, their deluded ideas about inherent superiority of class."

Her face was pale. "Marcius. I forbid you to speak of such things!"

"You've had everything you've ever wanted," he said. "Life, love, every pleasure of the senses. And yet you've never learned how wonderful it is just to be alive. You don't know the joy of just having a body that isn't sick and scaled with disease. You've never seen children who go to sleep and never wake up again. You look alive, but you've never really been alive at all."

"If you keep on talking that kind of nonsense," she said harshly, "there'll be no more talk of the Atom. By now I suppose you've guessed that I was responsible for smuggling you down here into the Atom?"

He nodded. "Why? You're a Rebel. Why rebel against yourself? You're a Princess of Deucalion. You already rule the Earth via the Atom."

"You should know, if you weren't insane, that the House of Deucalion has never really managed anything. The Deucalions are only figureheads; the Military usurped all our power by taking over the Gateway in and out of the Atom. Who controls that gateway controls life itself, as you should know. Their control has made our civilization static, rotten; it will die if we can't regain control of the Gateway. A free way in and out of the Atom will break their bottleneck, free us from the Military yoke."

SHE TURNED TO ONE side, and rested her hand on a tabulating machine, a highly complex arrangement of photo-electric cells and electronic tubes. "This is the location-analyzer," she said. "I've already made the calculations. All I have to do is press this correlation lever in the necessary way, repeat certain patterns, and the problem will come out, solved. I'll do that as soon as I have your promise. Your promise that as soon as you have calculated the Freeway, you'll share that knowledge with me."

"You're implying then," Phaon said, "that this machine will give

the space-coordinates of a *neutrino*?"

She nodded. "That's all you need to know. With the location of the *neutrino*, you could calculate a route, a free way out of the Atom. That's why you wanted to come down into the Atom. So that is the bargain, Marcius. I'll give you the space-coordinates of a *neutrino* for the promise of giving me the calculations of the Freeway once you've gotten the correct figures."

He could only give one answer; it was his only chance. And even if she also knew the free way out of the Atom, it would not change the situation of the plainsdogs at all. Their position would be no worse.

"It's a bargain," he said. "Give me the location of the *neutrino*."

Neutrinos, two-thousandths the mass of electrons and with no electric charge by which they could be influenced electrically. They explained why electrons, shot out of the same atomic nuclei under the same conditions, did not have the same energy. The *neutrino* had long been the mystery element of the atomic structure. But Thanus and Crantor and Phaon had solved its mystery. It was through the *neutrino* itself that a free way out of the atom might be found. Even that was not a certainty.

One thing he had realized quickly: he had very little chance of ever finding a *neutrino* without Rhea. Even with a ship of his own, unfettered, and with unlimited resources, it might take years of atomtime to find a *neutrino*. She stood before him, very stiff and straight and cold. It seemed to Phaon that even the potentiality of human warmth had been bred out of her over the centuries. "Rhea," he said. "What are the chances of my taking a cold shower?"

"What? Oh you fool!"

"But it means a lot to me. A simple pleasure, and after all, look what you're getting for it!"

"Don't you know it's hell here in the Atom? There are no pleasures here! There's no air, no water, no

food, save that brought down the trail of size from Earth. The Rebels live in constant fear that these essentials will give out. The Rebels have to plunder freight ships. Sometimes we can capture a Guard or some visiting member of the City, hold them for ransom—air and water." She touched her forehead and her hand was trembling slightly. "And the Guards recognized me when I brought you in and carted you out here into the atomvoid. That means I'll never be able to go back through the gateway to Earth. I'm a Rebel now, officially; before, as a Princess of the House of Deucalion, I could go and come freely, and my Rebel membership was unknown. Now, when they get me, I'll be put into the mines like any other Rebel."

"That would be awful," Phaon said. "You don't mind however if I fail to weep copious tears over the possibility?"

"All this chatter means nothing, of course," she said. "You've promised, and I'm sure you'll keep that promise." She punched keys and the location-analyzer purred a few seconds, then spat a card out into a slot. She read the location to him. He memorized it, but she kept the card.

He stepped away from her, realized then that he was afraid of her. Of her sophistication, her amorality, her ruthlessness. "I'll need the auxiliary ship you mentioned," he said.

"It's yours."

"You realize that I'll have to return to the heart of the Iron Atom. I have the space-coordinates, but to chart a course to the *neutrino*, I'll have to return to the proton sun, the center of the system?"

"Yes. I know that. I also know you have one chance in a million of escaping, once you'll penetrated to the proton sun; but it's a chance. A number of us could not escape, any easier than one. There's no use of more of us being captured, is there? And anyway, you're the only one who could chart the course."

He bowed. "Everything seems to be understood perfectly. I would like to leave now."

"You may do so, Marcius. The auxiliary is faster than the Guards' ships. Alastor, our Rebel leader, perfected a drive that Perphredo would like to have. When you're ready to contact me, this etheradio signal will find me no matter where you are in the atom. The ship, all Rebel ships, are equipped with a sub-etheric radio attachment invented by Alastor. With them we can communicate without being intercepted by any AG's."

● **S**HE TAPPED OUT A BRIEF dit-da-ditting rhythm. He memorized it and after that there was very little communication between them. She seemed utterly unmoved by their parting which seemed a little odd to Phaon because she was supposed to have loved Marcius not so long ago.

She gave him a few simple directions for handling the auxiliary ship and then he felt the slight jar as the smaller vessel shot away. Through the view-plate, he watched Rhea's tiny projectile drive straight up into the atomsky at a tremendous speed, then contract to the vanishing point against the blazing firmament of molecular galaxies.

Phaon watched that part of the atomvoid that had absorbed her ship for longer than was necessary. And in spite of himself he was still thinking of Rhea as his auxiliary ship drove inward toward the center of the Atomic system and ultimately was surrounded by the eyes and ears and waiting chains of the enemy.

She had left him with a feeling of great loneliness. In appearance, he had always been far apart from the shrunken, starved plainspeople; in mind he was alien to the Life-Givers. He had always felt alone, and now he felt more alone than ever.

He thought of Thala then, too. Thala who was dying. Thala who, beside Rhea's vital, atomfired beauty, would seem grotesque and inhuman. If Thala could be given the atomfire before she was eaten away

completely by death, she would also be beautiful. But Rhea was beautiful now.

Phaon's hands gripped the control levers. How could he allow his memory of Thala to be blurred by Rhea? Thala had come to him at the ends of the many days he had spent under the atomfire. She had walked with him over the sands at night. She laughed weakly like a child when he lifted her and ran with her.

Yet Phaon found it hard to hate Rhea; he regretted the hate he should feel for her and her kind. She was a result of a system—not a cause—though she was helping to preserve a system of incredible tyranny.

Phaon blocked memory and speculation, forced himself to face the surrounding dangers which he had sought to avoid by thought patterns of escape. He came in toward Electron Two, his body tense, his muscles taut and his eyes set to face odds no man could hope to beat.

From the viewpoint of a man in the Iron Atom, Electron Two swung around the proton-sun in thirty eight 'days.' It was forty million 'miles' from the central heatless luminary. It was seven thousand 'miles' in diameter. Its gravity was equal to one-tenth that of Earth's. Its day was equal to fourteen hours and from the viewpoint of a man on Earth, the units of time and distance would have been replaced by milli-seconds and milli-centimeters. Unimaginably small quantities, for as size decreased, so did time.

From the atom's view, each electron was a full-fledged, if erratic, planet. From Earth's view, each of the innumerable electrons was but a spark of energy with a minus electric charge. The old concept of the Atom as only a smaller part of a macrocosmic universe no longer applied. Here was none of the dependability of the Solar System. As far as microcosmology was concerned, the only law that applied at all was the law of uncertainty. Over a long period of atomtime, however, orbits maintained a predictable constant.

Phaon jumped; his stomach went

hollow as the etheradio receiver of the control room crackled to life. "Marcius. This is Perphredo. Bring your ship down—now! I need not explain, do I, what happens to anything hit by a sub-etheric blaster beam?"

Phaon's eyes grew dark and still as he spun the view-plates. Ships were everywhere, swarming and thickening; they had been waiting for him. Helplessness, suppression, a feeling of inescapable defeat weighed upon him, bowing his wide shoulders, squeezing the sweat from his pores.

"Land your ship near the hangers outside the Domed city on this graviton. Hear me, Marcius!"

IF HE DIDN'T RESPOND TO that command immediately, Phaon would die. As long as he was alive there was always a chance that he might find a way to the *neutrino*. Looking directly at Death and recognizing it and accepting it was impossible for Phaon. Death was the final denial of all his dreams—his dreams of a time when the children who played in the old riverbed would outlive the castles they made from sand.

So he set the ship down. He did it with a dogged resignation that did not quite admit defeat.

He was taken to hand by silent, cynical-faced Guardsmen, hustled inside an opaque atometal tubeway that would cross the graviton's surface and into the city's dome like a gleaming artery into a glass heart. They relieved him of his pressure suit, but that gave him no sense of temporary freedom, not now. The whole airless void of the Iron Atom had begun to feel like a pressure-suit around him and his only thought now was to escape from the Atom. Find the *neutrino* and strike for freedom.

As they transported him down the tubeway toward the Dome, Phaon's fascination with things that lived—with power and vitally growing things—somewhat drowned his sense of crushing defeat and death. Indus-

try was everywhere present. It thrilled him, sent the blood pounding in his veins. For here atomfire metals and other sub-etheric metals were being mined to give humans life, to make humans free of the bonds of mortality, sickness, and disease. It didn't matter to him at the moment that only the select few of Earth would receive the benefits of this industry. It sufficed for Phaon that any human life anywhere would be more alive.

Blast furnaces belched streaming tongues of flame against the curving roof of the three-mile City dome as they melted atometal into ingots for easy transportation up the trail of size to Earth.

The Life-Givers accepted the atom-reduction machine Thanus had invented as a matter of course. But Phaon thought of it as the greatest miracle so-far conceived and exploited by human intellect.

It accomplished a dual purpose. It emitted a powerful, ultra-short vibration which shrank atoms by forcing electrons into their atomic nuclei. And these contracted atoms were made actually smaller than an electron as the atom-reducer sucked from the atoms an energy Thanus had called *massergy*—the energy of mass and weight.

Thus, a human being, a ship—anything—was reduced to such a small size that an electron of the Iron Atom had all the attributes of Earth—relatively, approximately the same size, the same gravity. To a human being, an electron became an erratic planet.

Massergy was stored in the atom-reducers. One on Earth, built around the scrap of iron ore Thanus used for his experiments. One on the shell of the molecule of which the Iron Atom was a part. When a person left the Atom by this two-stage route, *massergy* was fed into him from the atom-reducers. It was the same with ships and freight.

There had been one big looming enigma until Thanus had advanced to Crantor his theories of the function, or at least one function, of the

neutrino. The enigma was this: that atometal, which was dug up by the ton and sent up the trail of size to Earth, arrived on Earth just as dense, just as malleable, as relatively large as it was in the Atom!

It was metal such as had never existed on Earth. And some of it, mainly the atomfire metal, was a stuff that made people something more than human and allowed them to live on an Earth that otherwise would support human life no longer.

The puzzling thing had been that a ton of atometal in the Atom was a ton of atometal on Earth! Where did the atometal get the *massergy* which allowed its size to increase when it was never reduced in the first place. Thanus, Crantor and Phaon had solved the problem. They had reasoned that space is finite, that it curves back on itself through a four-dimensional path. Since space cannot be dissociated from time and matter, time and matter also curve back on themselves. And their mathematical figures had proven that matter had a curvature in *size*, from the little to the large.

It would seem then that there might be—a *natural free way in and out of the Iron Atom, from the little to the large*. The mysterious particle, the *neutrino*, had seemed the logical point of investigation.

If he could only live to reach that *neutrino*.

Phaon saw the workers then.

He reacted violently, flinching, a kind of cold horror tingling in the roots of his hair. The workers came out of the mine-openings. They moved like machines. They were no longer human; they were mindless with no wills, no emotions, no consciousness of their own.

Phaon's skin went pale. There were thin ugly lines down his cheeks to his mouth. For a man who worshiped freedom and the fertility of will, it was an ultimate fate. They could not have planned a worse one had they planned such a fate for Phaon alone.



WHEN THEY took him into the metallic harshness of Perphredo's office, it was as if Phaon were an animal being shoved into a cage within a cage within a cage. Like all the Life-Givers, Perphredo was tall, broad-shouldered. There was no warmth in his eyes, but only a cold, speculative brightness.

Perphredo dismissed the two guards and studied Phaon for a while. "You're afflicted, Marcius. But you also have knowledge of the Iron Atom that I must have. A free way in and out of the atom would shatter our control; we must either destroy such a free way or control it, as we control the atom-reduction gateways."

The Iron Atom Commander leaned across the bright metallic luster of his desk. "Surprised that I know all about you, Marcius? That we were ready for you? If you knew Rhea as I do you wouldn't be surprised. She told us about you, that you were on your way back to the Proton Sun."

No, Phaon wasn't surprised at Rhea's move. He was glad in a way; now he felt that he could hate her with no compunction.

"Rhea's made a bargain with me, Marcius. Chart the path from here to the neutrino, and let me have that information. Rhea and I will take care of developments from there. She was very fond of me at one time, Marcius. Now I guess she's growing interested again, a purely pragmatic interest of course. But I'll bargain with her; if a free way is found, I doubt that the Military could maintain their rule. The Managerial House will assume control; and if I help Rhea now, I'll have a nice position in the New Order. If the Military is purged, which it will certainly be if the Deucalions assume control, I'll escape that un-

pleasantness. So, Marcius, if you'll help me, I'll make your sentence easier."

Bitterness and rage rose up through the dry wick of Phaon's body, exploded in his head. Involuntarily, without thinking, he leaped suddenly at Perphredo's face. A terrific shock pounded through him, hammered him to his knees as he ploughed into an invisible barrier and fell to the floor. The floor was metal; it was cold. He could not get up. Blood ran out of his nose.

Perphredo smiled. "I'm really granting you an exceptional favor, Marcius. And I hope that your gratitude will move you to tell me what you know as soon as you chart a route to the *neutrino*. You see, I'm not going to send you to surgery. I won't ask you to sign a release authorizing us to operate.

"We have maintained certain formalities, you know. There are many reasons for a man to be subjected to surgery. For one thing, they are malleable then, good workers. But even more important, to the workers as well as ourselves, radio-activation works on the brain down there in the mines. Our operations are skillful, specially designed to prevent the mental disintegration of certain higher cortical thought centers of the mind. Before you're down there in the mines two days, Marcius, you'll tell me what you know. Either that, or you'll be wishing we had cut out every cell in your skull!"

Perphredo leaned back. "Inform your cell guard when you're ready to cooperate. But don't let the activation go too far, or you won't be able to cooperate."

They took Phaon down into the pits, lowered him into a tomb. Down from Earth, down the trail of size, away from the sun, away from the desert nights, and the freedom of the plains, away from all that he could identify as reality. And then further still, into a pit where men were robots, and where there was no time, and men died beneath artificial luciferin lights and were replaced, and where no one cared.

● **THEY HAD STRIPPED HIM,** given him a miner's suit and tools. Overseers told him his duties, then he was led back to a dimly-lighted cell where a yellow bulb glowed like the promise of madness.

No windows increased Phaon's feeling of suffocation and entombment, and the sensation of illimitable depth pressed more tightly around him.

He stood there trying to control the pounding of his pulse. There were two bunks and from one of them, in the corner, came a sound that chilled Phaon's blood. Sweat ran down his face as he saw the figure lying there, staring vacantly at the ceiling. His eyes were flat and dead. If he saw anything, it meant nothing to him.

Phaon tried to relax on his own bunk but it was useless. His own defeat and the mental vacuum and disintegration awaiting him grated round and round in his skull like a rusted iron ball.

Even his capacity for dreaming, or for remembering what he had once dreamed, was denied him...

Sometime later a voice spoke from a loud speaker. "*Shift Five. Attention!*"

The slave on the other bunk got up stiffly, walked to the door. His arms hung loosely as he stood there, waiting. Whatever operation was performed, one threshold response level was maintained so they could receive orders, respond to commands, set up and keep simple behavior patterns.

The cell door clanged open and the man marched out. Phaon went to the doorway. An overseer stood in the tubular corridor, encased in a pressure suit and oxygen helmet.

"Shift Five. Muster at Elevator Two."

The automaton marched away down the corridor and turned from view. Phaon watched the overseer.

"Those orders apply to you too, Marcius; we have means of coercion if you don't follow orders."

The overseer found it necessary to demonstrate. With a small disk that whirled noiselessly, he gave a brief

but horrible demonstration. It was a subsonic generator. Later, Phaon figured that it must have a ten to thirteen cycle note, below the range of human hearing, that it probably had a strength of about a hundred and twenty-five decibels. But right then he wasn't figuring anything except that he was dying. The pressure suit and helmet protected the overseer evidently. From the subsonic generator and radioactivation in the pits. Nothing protected Phaon.

Later, Phaon dragged himself back up the wall, his body soaked with perspiration, his muscles twitching.

He had learned something, he thought, as he staggered after the other workers down the hall. He had learned to hate. He had learned to hate enough to kill without compunction. He had learned that life alone is not virtuous.

He also learned to work. Ordinarily, he knew he would have thrilled to the feel of resistance to his muscles, and the deep drawn breaths, the conflict with metal. There was no thrill now. He worked like a man digging his own grave.

Shift five consisted of ten men, blasting out a new atometal tunnel somewhere under the surface of Electron Two. They worked as the orders came from the speaker, or from one of the two overseers. No one talked.

They worked with air-jacks. The din was a sullen roar in Phaon's ears, jolting his bones. He worked with a desperate weariness, his body taut, his mind waiting, straining for signs of that inevitable mental attack.

Sometimes he paused to watch lumbering cranes scoop up fragments of atometal and drop loads into a railcar. Sweat and metal-dust caked his face and burned in his eyes. But he managed to study the will-less men. They did skilled work, but only as a reaction to long-established stimuli. Their bodies were in good condition. If the radioactivity affected physical structure there was no indication of it. Evidently only the higher cortical brain

centers were affected, as Perphredo had mentioned.

After they returned to their cells at the end of that first shift, Phaon felt the first signs of the mental attack.

● **THE OVERSEER GRINNED** at Phaon from the opening in the cell door. "Commander Perphredo wants to know if you're ready to cooperate, Marcius."

Phaon said nothing. He tried not to think of what was beginning to happen to his brain.

"You're thinking of trying to escape, Marcius? It's been done. Some have refused to sign surgery permits and have managed to escape before the radiation got them. They've used ingenious methods of getting away, too. But it did them no good. After you escape from the mines, where is there to go? You're still imprisoned by the Atom vacuum. You have to have a pressure suit. You have to have a ship and then you might manage to join the Rebels. Otherwise you're trapped, no air, no food, no water."

Phaon lay down and closed his eyes. He thought of various wild schemes and discarded them. Later he made a few quiet cautious stimulus-response tests on the man in the cell with him.

There was one possible method of escape he could exploit, but even that slim gamble was dependent on certain conditions. He knew from the dull ache rising in his skull that he didn't have much time.

● **BACK DOWN IN THE PITS** after a therapeutic rest period, with music, up in the compound, Phaon thought desperately about that compound. He had to do something now, anything. But he had to do it now; the pain in his head was becoming intolerable. At intervals, he almost blanked out, and in the darkness his head seemed to expand like a balloon, and explode showering streamers of agonizing fire.

The compound. They went up there in an elevator. The compound

was bordered on one side by the up-curving wall of one segment of the City's dome. On two other sides by the dormitories. On the remaining side was a ten foot wall. Beyond the wall was the limitless smooth plain that stretched around the Electron planet, broken only by man-made cities of brittle atometal. On this plain, near the wall, were the grouped hangers and living quarters of some faction of the AG.

The compound was covered with an air-pressure dome, and Phaon had no pressure suit.

A vise closed on his skull; he suppressed a scream. His facial bones seemed to be twisting loose. He stumbled back as though to rest, got behind the men of the shift. Atometal dust half blinded him. He choked and the air-jack was heavy in his hands. Around him, the others worked. Phaon's movements were hidden as he loosened the tap holding the heavy steel bit in the jaws of the air-jack.

His muscles curled. As he heaved up the air-jack, exhilaration surged within him. He pressed the activating trigger. The heavy bit plunged out like a bullet, shattered the loud-speaker. An arc of fire sprayed wildly.

Straining at the air-jack, dragging it after him, Phaon swung upward, swung the air-jack in an explosive unbending of his straining body, released it. The overseer screamed as the heavy implement caught him full in the chest, caving bone, smashing him into the jagged torn wall of atometal. He rolled from the shelf as the other overseer frantically started to bring up his subsonic generator. Phaon hurled a huge chunk of atometal ore. The razor-faceted, chipped metal crashed into the overseer's helmet, tore through the veneering, crushed his head into the wall like an egg.

Phaon quickly stripped off the pressure suit of the overseer who had fallen first. Through the speaker inside the helmet, Phaon yelled wildly. "Shift Five—Attention!"

The air-jacks stopped. The men stood up. "About face! Muster at elevator six. Forward march."

There was no conflicting order from the demolished wall-speaker. There were no witnesses to report the one-man revolt.

Above the steps leading down into the compound the elevator doors automatically opened. Crouching in behind the miners for protection, Phaon shouted as he heard the clanging alarms. "Forward march. Into the compound. March. March."

He followed the marching men down the steps, across the compound toward the ten-foot wall. Guards ran out, stopped in momentary bewilderment. Phaon discharged the overseer's ray-burner and five men turned to lumps of charcoal. Phaon swung on around, and blasted a hole through the dome that merged with the surface of the electron planet just beyond the wall.

"Keep marching!" He yelled. And the miners, to a man, marched into the wall. They continued trying to march until they piled up in a kicking, surging heap at the base of the wall. Phaon ran up the living mound and dived through the hole in the dome.

Night had fallen quickly as it does in the Atom. The Proton sun had dropped on the other side of Electron Two. Phaon was glad of that; it was time a little luck came his way for a change.

He ran. Even hampered as he was by the pressure-suit and the grav-caulked shoes, he felt the bursting freedom of his body lengthening out as he gained speed toward the nearest AG ship. For an instant he might have been running free on an Earth incomputable distances away up the trail of size, running bare-skinned through the desert night.

The face of a startled AG man loomed up in the flash of the hand-light and Phaon rayed it out of the way, and out of existence. A rumbling sounded behind him. Floodlights flowed over him, but he was within a few yards of the darkened AG ship and he could see the air-lock. It was open. A mechanic's lorry ground to a stop and uniformed men leaped free and threw themselves flat as they opened up with ray-burners.

Phaon fired once—he couldn't spare time for further effort—then was inside the air-lock. He turned, frantically closed the valves, then hurled himself in through the inner door, smashed into the control room. He grabbed the T-bar and the thrumming vibration of outraged converters ripped through him. He gasped as he was hurled against the wall. He fought against unconsciousness. Blood ran down his throat and he coughed and lay there, and then, dimly, he saw a face looking down at him.

It was the face of Perphredo.

He raised to an elbow. "Perphredo," he said weakly. "Perphredo, tell me. Do you supply your AG ships with cold showers?"

Phaon blanked out. This was not surprising, he was thinking at the time, because the ship was stressed to three G's above it, gravitic cancelators.



GRADUALLY, as he swam back slowly to consciousness, he began to realize that Perphredo's face was the result of etheradio-video projection.

Phaon dragged himself across the mesh-grid flooring, got himself up and into the control seat.

"Marcius, that was a magnificent achievement; I must confess my admiration. However, I'm right behind you, and I'll stay behind you. My fleet is following. I was watching you with my scanner and so I started ahead of my fleet. I'm going to remain out of your range, but you can't escape me. You'll have to lead me to the Rebels, or die in the atom-void."

Phaon rotated the view-plate until it framed Perphredo's pursuing ship. He had not been unconscious but a few seconds and he was still near enough to the Proton sun to chart a course to the probable location of the *neutrino*. Then, for forty-

five million atom "miles" straight up out of the plane of the ecliptic of the Iron Atom, Phaon's ship plunged. There might have been a loose graviton, photon, or one of those terrors of the atom-lanes, a mushroom-nosed cosmic ray, in his path. But Phaon didn't examine the sky ahead. Course correction would have cut his speed.

He wouldn't be captured again; he had learned some things. One of them was that merely being alive wasn't so important after all. And death could be a welcome alternative to several easily-imagined fates.

And all the time he had the etheradio sending out that signal given to him by Rhea, the signal Perphredo couldn't intercept. It wasn't for any such high ethical motivation as keeping his promise that he was trying to contact Rhea. Phaon had grown a little less devoted to ethical standards since that promise had been made. But it was obvious now that Perphredo, having failed to gain the necessary information, was leading his AG Ships in a mass move directed at the entire Rebel fleet. Knowing Phaon and the Rebels both sought a free way out of the atom, and knowing that only Phaon could find that free way, Perphredo was throwing everything in a last chance effort to tail Phaon to the Rebel fleet and be rid of it for good and all.

Or so it appeared. Anyway, Phaon would need the Rebels' help; they certainly would require his calculations.

Then he heard the answering signal, then Rhea's voice. Her face took form on the screen above the control panel. Her perfectly moulded features were shaken a little now; the cool impervious look was broken with amazement.

Phaon grinned. "Your friend, Perphredo, is right behind me, and right behind him is his AG fleet. He didn't get the information you wanted."

"But I—"

"You didn't think I could possibly escape after reaching the Proton Sun," he said. "So you decided to renew your acquaintanceship with

Perphredo. From what little experience I've had with that gentleman, I would say that if he had gotten the information from me, you might never have gotten it anyway; certainly he hasn't trusted you either. Whatever might have happened is beside the point though now. He'll follow me and his fleet will follow me until he finds the Rebel fleet. Or until the void swallows me. You Rebels have to help me!"

"We're too far away to help you right now."

"Help me escape Perphredo's fleet or you'll never find that free way out of the Atom. But then you know that."

"Yes, yes, I know that! Marcius—we couldn't possibly reach you in time. You have to lose Perphredo somehow. Wait—Marcius, there's a neutron dead-center on your course!"

He spun the view-plates; he saw it then. The sight of the jewel-like particle was a weird sight as it came speeding up, growing more massive by the minute, great sparklings and witch-like radiances, leaping from faceted pinnacle to rhomboidal spire. It was a gigantic crystal of planetary stature caught in the Proton Sun's shine. In a planetary sense, it had no shape. One titantic monolith of faceted iridescence shot away from the main bulk for over two thousand miles, like a handle to a spined club.

"Marcius—you can lose yourself in that neutron forest. I'll get there as rapidly as possible. We can take care of Perphredo's single ship, pick you up and escape before the main AG fleet arrives!"

She was right. It was a good forest in which to lose oneself. A vast maze of spires, jeweled caverns, interlocking, intertwining frost crystal pathways.

With irony, he said. "I know you have only my best interests at heart."

● **PERPHREDO SAW PHAON** dropping his ship toward the neutron's fairyland of refracted light and shot toward him. Phaon was still ten miles up when Perphredo came within range.

A red beam of violence raked out from Perphredo's ship. Phaon felt the sickening drop, the roar in his head, the rending of metal. He fought the controls and then a jagged, blinding valley of reflected and prismatic light ballooned upward. He threw in the cushioners, then fell flat on the floor. There was a shattering scream of ruptured metal and the sudden heat of interior flames.

He crawled toward a rent in the ship's side, was ejected by the pressure of escaping air. Then he was floating down across the iridescent valley, showing no indisposition to drop to the surface. There was no gravity.

A neutron had no electric charge, which was synonymous with no gravity in the atomic world—which also explained the planet's lack of shape. Frantically, Phaon grabbed for a needle-like spire, then bent his knees and shot himself toward a jutting wall. He clutched, clung, then looked back. Perphredo's ship came to a swift flaming landing near the shattered hulk of his own ship. Two pressure-suited figures were expelled from the air-lock. They moved in fast toward Phaon, impelled by bursts from small guns.

Phaon attempted a ray-burner shot. The invisible emanations struck a spire a few feet away which burst apart with a livid flash of brilliance. Phaon flexed his knees, unbent, shot himself toward a giant crystal slab which leaned at an angle that would have been impossible were gravity present. He stuck on the under surface of the overhang, went sliding down until he was stopped by the base.

The giant crystal was honeycombed with a terrifically involved maze in which he could easily lose himself. But his oxygen supply was limited. He had no food or water. And then suddenly he realized that he had trapped himself.

He was in a cave, and the only opening was that through which he had entered.

The brilliant crystalline walls mocked him in flashing lancing fa-

cets of silent laughter. A figure appeared in the opening of the cave. It wasn't Perphredo, but the second AG Officer. He was in plain sight and Phaon started to fire, then lowered his ray-burner. It was only a perfectly-reflected image of the Officer. A reflection from the mirror-like crystalline wall fronting the cave.

Perphredo was standing clear, allowing his under-Officer to take the initial risk. The image of that officer was a clear and perfect duplicate. From a space-kit at the waist of his pressure-suit, the Officer drew a treated atometal bomb about the size of his fist.

His helmet phone whispered to Phaon. From the tone of that voice, Perphredo was enjoying himself. "For an insane man, Marcius, you have an amazing ability to get out of difficult situations. However, this time I think you'll agree that you have no choice but to die or to compromise."

• WHEN THROWN INTO the cave opening, that bomb would explode with tremendous violence. Phaon lay there, flat, his face wet with perspiration. The ray-burner seemed to have a deadly weight. He tried to drive his brain, his senses, out and away from the cave, out of the Iron Atom—back to the plains. To the kids and the sand castles and visions of what the plain-people might have become had he succeeded.

Instead of memory, a spark flashed in his mind. His body moved quickly. He leveled the ray-burner and fired. He fired straight at the polished crystalline wall which reflected the image of the AG Officer, an image so perfect that for a moment Phaon had thought it was the real person.

The image was motionless for a second. Then a shrill scream sounded in Phaon's helmet phone. The Officer's features seemed to melt, erupt to red steam inside the oxygen helmet. A ragged smoking hole ate away his chest. Then the image exploded.

He heard Perphredo's shout of surprise and fear.

Phaon said. "You can't get close enough to throw that bomb, Perphredo. You should know the Iron Atom better, as long as you're supposed to rule it. The neutron is indestructible and indivisible, like a photon or positron. That means its surface isn't only infinitely hard, but completely non-absorbent to light rays; a perfect reflector. There's nothing like testing a theory with direct experimentation, Perphredo. I fired at the image, and the sub-etheric rays were reflected back directly to the substance of the Officer!"

Perphredo answered, but he was evidently in flight from the hard breath that distorted whatever he said. Phaon didn't much care what he said. He crawled warily to the cave opening in time to see Perphredo's ship streaking away from the neutron, back in the direction of his oncoming fleet. Several Rebel ships were coming in from the other side of the neutron. At least Phaon assumed they were Rebel ships from Perphredo's decidedly negative reaction to their approach.

He heard Rhea's voice then. A few minutes later, Phaon was in the control room of Rhea's ship and they were flashing into the atom-void.

• RHEA DIDN'T LOOK ANY different, except perhaps a little more purposeful. Phaon said nothing, but concentrated on getting out of his pressure-suit, stretching his muscles, taking deep breaths. It was a small pilot ship and evidently only he and Rhea were aboard.

"Now, about that cold shower," Phaon said finally. "If you only understood—"

Her face reddened. "Oh, Marcius, you're insane, insane!"

"I know. How could I forget it?"

"But how could you talk about anything so ridiculous at a time like this?"

"Don't you ever take a bath?"

"Why—look here, Marcius. You've just accomplished several miracles.

One miracle no one could accomplish in the Atom is to find enough water, of any temperature, to take a shower."

"It's one of the few real pleasures I've ever gotten out of life," Phaon sighed. "Are you sure—?"

She stiffened and her hands clenched into fists. "Give us the calculations, the course to set for the *neutrino*, Marcius. We can't fight the entire AG fleet; we've got to reach the *neutrino*. If it is a free way out of the atom, it's our only chance to escape. Perphredo won't be shaken now; he'll follow us. I know Perphredo."

"You knew him very well," Phaon said. "Well enough to side with him in trying to torture that information out of me!"

"The stakes are larger than any one of us," she said, but somehow, he thought, she hadn't the spark of conviction in her voice she might have had. Could she be a little ashamed of that brief pact with Perphredo? Phaon found it impossible to judge whether or not she was human at all the way he preferred to judge human qualities.

Phaon had no choice, regardless. He gave her the course he had charted to the distant *neutrino*.

Quickly, she contacted another Rebel ship. A square, strong, dour face appeared on the screen. "Alas-tor," Rhea said. "Marcius is with us as I've explained to you. He believes the *neutrino* will afford us a way out of the Iron Atom. We may have to engage Perphredo's fleet and you must prepare every Rebel ship."

Alas-tor nodded reluctantly. "I still don't see how the *neutrino* can give us a free way out of the atom."

"We have to take the chance," Rhea said.

"How can you trust the word of an afflicted one, Rhea?"

She hesitated. "I—I don't know. But you have my orders; carry them out."

The screen faded and took Alas-tor's doubting face with it.

She came up very close to him. Her arms were on his shoulders. Now her voice was soft, with a husky

electric undertone. "Insane or not—Marcius—I still love you. I found that out. I thought of you, what Perphredo might be doing to you. I was going to try to rescue you from the pits."

He didn't say anything; his pulse throbbed.

"Marcius, can you forgive me? I was carried away by my ambitions, to free civilization from the Military yoke. I thought you were so insane anyway that—"

She kissed him. He was unyielding.

"Promise that when we reach the *neutrino* you'll share your information with us, Marcius."

He said. "And what about my people, the plainmen? What do you promise them? Will you promise them the same unlimited supplies of atometal that the Life-Givers have? Can you promise that they will be allowed to grow into human beings? Can you promise life for the children of the plains?"

She shoved back away from him. Her breath came hard, and her eyes were narrow. "Can't you escape that preposterously insane delusion of yours? Do you think for one minute that I, that anyone, could believe that you're not Marcius—that you actually were a plainsdog? Animals, filthy animals. Do you think I could want such a creature, even if such a thing were possible that you—"

Somehow he held down the impulse to strike her. All his life he had thought of beauty, of living among beautiful people. He couldn't strike a blow at the image of beauty. "You Rebels hope to take the control of the atom away from the Military; that means nothing to me. How do I know what you will do when the Deucalions are in control? Or rather I should say it's obvious that your attitude toward the plainspeople will be worse than the Military's, if anything. The Military didn't particularly care about the plainspeople, one way or the other, so long as they were dying. But the Deucalions have always had a positive, class hatred for my people."

She stared at him for what seemed

an interminably long time while the ship followed the charted path toward the *neutrino*. "All right," she said finally. "Show us the free way through the *neutrino*, and I'll promise to give the plainsdogs all the atometal they want. On one condition, Marcius."

"And what is the condition?"

"That when and if your sanity comes back to you, Marcius, and you see how ridiculous this all is, that the condition is all off. No more concerning ourselves with a few dying animals."

Phaon nodded agreement; he didn't really feel that she was in any way reliable. He wasn't even certain at this stage that he would share the information with her. Not if he could get a ship of his own, somehow. Meanwhile he needed the Rebels to handle Perphredo's ships. And on top of all the rest of it, Phaon's calculations on escaping the atom via the *neutrino* were none too certain either.



PHAON stared through the view-plate. The small pilot ship was, or seemed, alone in the atomvoid. The rest of the Rebel ships were collecting up ahead somewhere. Rhea had set the ship's controls to come in toward the *neutrino* at a slightly different tangent. Phaon sat down with a stylus and began to recheck his figures. He rechecked them, went over them again. In this instant, a slight margin of error could make a terrible difference.

And later they were approaching within forty-thousand miles of the approximate location of the *neutrino*. He had it figured as finely as was possible. He wasn't certain yet by any means; in this case you could try out a theory only once.

He wasn't talking necessarily to

Rhea, but he talked. Talking about the *neutrino* seemed to make the whole concept a little more substantial in his mind. "The *neutrino* is literally an atomic particle that isn't there; it's a hole in space. But on the other side of that hole there has to be something. 'Space'. 'Time'. 'Matter'. They're the three great enigmas of the Universe, from the infinitely small to the outward fringes of entropy. Where do 'Space' and 'Time' and 'Matter' begin, where do they end? How can they begin and end? Liken the universe to a four-dimensional sphere, with the stars and nebulae superimposed on the surface of the sphere. But what is inside the sphere? True emptiness? A hole in space?"

Phaon closed his eyes. He had given himself a headache. "You see, I've figured along with Thanus and Crantor, that this so-called emptiness is really a *neutrino*. A *neutrino* of unthinkable dimensions!

"And on the other hand maybe not of large dimension at all. It isn't a real sphere, remember. It's four-dimensional. Who can measure the fourth dimension in terms of units of distance? If one traveled the fourth-dimension, would he cover distance, time, or—size? My theory is that it's size. The problem of size may be the problem whose answer holds the secret of the Universe. Anyway, we're going to find out."

Rhea shook her head slowly, whispered. "How could a man with a mind like yours think of himself as a plainsdog?"

But Phaon didn't argue about that. "Look," he said with awe trembling in his throat.

Dimly, from the distance, swam a black circle in space. A deep blackness that hurt the eyes. An ominous frozen nothingness that seemed to hold the frigid silence of all that no one knew.

"The *neutrino*," Rhea whispered. "And Perphredo's fleet," Phaon said grimly. He pointed to the lower left-hand corner of the view-plate. As he spoke, one of the AG ships went up in flames.

• **B**RIGHT SPOTS OF FLAME appeared as Alastor's ship opened fire, and the fire was returned. As Rhea's ship came in, still a few thousand miles away, Phaon watched the awesome battle in deep atomspace.

The sight of the sleek metal being destroyed, the thought of the wonderful human organisms turning to charred dust in space, sickened Phaon. Ironic, he thought, that among the Life-Givers who enjoyed vital health and near immortality, life was held cheaply; among the plainspeople where death had ruled for centuries and disease had been the constant companion of nightmare years, life was so dear.

Ten slim hurtling shapes broke formation as Alastor's ships counter-attacked, and drove into seething pools of loose energy. They spread over space in a huge firefly cloud, then shot toward the converging point represented by Alastor's fleet.

From the noses of these converging ships shot glowing bullet-shapes which resembled photons seen from a great distance. Rhea stiffened as one of the Rebel ships was caught broadside by an explosive missile and disappeared utterly in that wild and deadly spray of energy, the shattering fire flinging it back to its component atoms.

White flames roared and hissed, flashed with inconceivable violence from forcetube cannons. Other ships were snuffed out by bursts of virulent fire. Intolerable disintegrating fires continued to flare out through inter-atomic space.

"I'm going in there," Rhea said harshly. Dials spun whole banks of needles. Metals squealed, walls shook, lights blinked as the ship plunged forward as though with a fury of its own. And Phaon thought, *she has the qualities of loyalty, bravery... plenty of bravery.*

"I'm tuning in the etheradio now," Rhea whispered. "You promised. Only Alastor's ship is left, but give him the figures. The calculations. Marcius—!"

He balled his fist, struck a quick hard blow. Rhea sagged and he

caught her and eased her to the floor. He tuned the etheradio again, this time so that the AG ships and Perphredo might also receive his message.

"Alastor! Can you hear me, Alastor?"

"Yes!"

"We're driving our ships directly into the *neutrino*!"

"You are insane, Marcius! Ships have gone into the *neutrino* before! By accident. It's always been a one way trip."

"That's the free way," Phaon said. "That's our only escape. Get these figures, Alastor, and get them correctly. If you don't you'll hit the *neutrino* wrong, and you'll isolate yourself from any normal universe. You will hit the *neutrino* so close to a certain spot within the perimeter that you will practically scrape its sides. And at that moment of contact, your speed must be an exact 10.04567 miles per second. Without acceleration. And I wish we could carry it more decimals than that."

He repeated the directions, then gave the coordinates that would regulate the moment of impact.

Quickly then, Phaon set the etheradio, retuned it to the secret wave length perfected by Alastor. A sound twisted him around. Rhea had a ray-burner trained on him. "Traitor," she said. "You gave Perphredo those directions too!" She fired.

• **T**HE AIR INSIDE THE TINY control room crackled with the release of kinetic energy. Phaon felt the pain along his side as he swung around, then kicked out savagely and followed through with a powerful lunge. He gripped her wrist. She snarled with pain and hate as the weapon fell from her fingers.

He said, "I gave Alastor the wrong figures—you understand that? Now, we'll give Alastor the correct figures by secret wavelength. Quick, before Alastor follows the wrong directions!"

This time, she gave Alastor the directions Phaon handed to her on a card. She explained to Alastor

that the other figures had been deliberately to mislead Perphredo.

Alastor's ship barely missed a concerted rush of Rebel ships as it plunged toward the dark looming abyss of the *neutrino*.

They intercepted Perphredo's voice then. He was commanding his fleet to follow him, to accept the challenge, to continue the chase into the *neutrino*. At that instant, Alastor's ship struck that doorway into the unknown, and winked out like a distant star in a black void.

Her hand rested on Phaon's wrist. She said in a voice he barely could hear: "Shall we follow now, Marcus?"

"Now, if ever," Phaon said. "I know the figures I gave first, and that Perphredo intercepted, were wrong; I'm not *certain* the ones we're following are right. If they're not, we may all meet again very soon in a nameless universe."

Her fingers closed on his wrist, tightly. "I've been thinking about a lot of things during this last bit of conflict within the atom," she said. "I've begun to fear death, Marcus, and I never was afraid of it before. I've seen too much death and destruction in the last hour. I don't want to see any more of it. And whether you think you're Marcus or Phaon—no matter what you think—I'll keep my promise to you—if we ever get back to Earth."

She means that, Phaon thought. It was a warm feeling.

Her fingers manipulated the controls then and the ship dropped toward the looming black maw of the *neutrino*. The area swelled until the atomsky was swept aside by its perimeter. In the view-plate he saw Perphredo's ship as it led a stream of AG ships after him toward the *neutrino*.

Then Phaon felt their own ship hit blackness.

A blinding flame pressed out from Phaon's twisted skull. From a great distance, he heard Rhea's fading cry, fading and dying like the whisper of a memory.

The blackness cleared. There was a swirling shifting of blazing white fires in a limitless void of the dark.

And then Phaon knew that they had done it; the dimension-twisting hell was passed; they were on the other side of the most enigmatic of atomic-particles, the *neutrino*—

And off their port bow was—the *Moon!*

This was interplanetary space. The moon to port. The Earth to starboard. And Phaon, with Rhea motionless and wordless beside him, stared at the Earth, the jewel beyond price that he had thought he would never see again. Alastor's ship was the only other one visible. And even considering the supposed justice of his fate didn't make the thought of what had happened to Perphredo any more pleasant to contemplate. In what nameless universe Perphredo and his fleet were now, no one would ever know.

They had come through a *neutrino*, from the small to the large. What was the answer?

• **EVEN AFTER THE PROOF,** it was incredible. Matter—matter curved back on itself. But what was matter's source? Where did it come from? In the atom a *neutrino* was a *neutrino*. And once man had conquered and traveled interplanetary space it would still be a *neutrino*. The doorway from the infinitely small to the infinitely large.

Matter then was a thing that curved back on itself, like space and time. The molecular universe was small? Maybe. Relatively, it was. In the Atom, the Universe was large, as large as the Universe was now. But who could really say what was large or small?

Phaon closed his eyes. In that moment of insight, he seemed to see the gigantic structure of the inbred universe. He saw each bit of matter as a full-scale universe in its own right, lying next to the Earth-universe. Each atom connected to the greater universe by a *neutrino* shaped like an infinitely wide-mouthed, infinitesimally small-spouted funnel. And each *neutrino* but a facet of another greater *neutrino* which existed at the core of the four-dimensional universe.

In order to emerge through the right facet, in order to prevent an emergence into a space millions of light-years distant from Earth, the small-spouted end of the atom-neutrino had to be entered at a certain speed, at a certain point of contact. Thus Earth was below, and their atom-ship was now a space-ship, in every sense of the word.

Atometal! Phaon felt the numbing lethargy, the shock of this incredible transition leaving him. *Atometal* fitted into the enigma now! *Thanus'* atom-reducers were in themselves but controlled, mechanical *neutrinos*. If an electron should pass through a *neutrino* it would emerge into the greater universe as a full-scale planet!

It remained to be seen whether we have such in our own solar system, Phaon thought, and he thought of the vast explorations possible if—

Phaon stopped thinking of vastness and concentrated on immediate particulars.

He whipped the ray-burner from Rhea's holster and stepped back. "Rhea," he said, "Princess of the House of Deucalion. Without the Guards, you're helpless. Your reign of suppression and your delusions of inherent superiority are ending. Take the ship down beside the ruins of the plainstown, ten miles outside the Capitol City."

Her face was pale. She still seemed dazed by that incredible transition. "Marcius," she said weakly. "I—"

"Not Marcius. Phaon," he said. "And you're my hostage. You'll remain my hostage until the plainspeople get what is their due, has been their due for centuries. That means ships. Ships to freight vast amounts of atometal they'll need to build cities of their own and furnish them with atomfire suns. There's no bottleneck any more. Neither the Military nor the House of Deucalion controls life on Earth now. We can find our own way, not only into the Iron Atom, but into the depths of countless atoms. The atomfire may be only an introduction to the wonders we will find."

Again he said. "Bring the ship down. Tell Alastor to do the same. Tell him I'll kill you if either of you resist."

●THE BARREN DESERT, spilling over with moonlight like a vast golden lake, rushed up to him with a hungry welcome, opening like the starving mouth of a ghost. And the ship settled down on cushioning flames outside the ruins of the town.

Alastor's ship settled after them a slight distance away. Phaon ordered Rhea through the inner door, through the air-lock and into the dry and dusty moonlight.

Rhea walked ahead of him then down the deserted, crumbled highway by the dry riverbed. Phaon called several times before the plainspeople filtered out of the shadows and gathered around him.

"Phaon...Phaon..." the children screamed his name over and over and they were all around him, all over him as he bent down. He took them in his huge arms.

"Run with us, Phaon!"

They led him away to the riverbed and there were the sandcastles, still standing.

Crantor stood there too then, his face beaming through his eyes. But Phaon looked in vain for the face he had wanted most to see. Rhea, her face pale, her eyes wide with disbelief, stood near him, staring.

Phaon talked to them as they crawled out of the ruins. He talked above the glad shouts and cries of the children. "The Iron Atom is open to us all. Ships will flood our towns with atomfire. The towns will grow into cities, greater than the old. The children will grow to be men. All of you will live, all of you will grow strong. The routes in and out of the Iron Atom are open, and can never be controlled by any class or group. Not one, but all the worlds of the infinitely small and the infinitely large, are open to us, Crantor!"

"But you've only been gone an hour," Crantor said. "That means—"

But the relative factors of time and other complexities would come

later. Phaon looked at the faces around him. "Thala," he said then.

No one spoke. Not for a while. Finally Crantor said. "She's dead, Phaon. It was only an hour, but that was too long to wait. She was dying when you left. She didn't tell you."

Phaon turned and started walking over the sand. His strides lengthened. The mountains loomed up darkly ahead and he began to run. The sand whispered under his feet.

"Wait..."

He stopped and Rhea's figure was running toward him.

She stood before him, her breath coming hard. Her face was in shadow, but her eyes shone with a wet brightness. "I didn't believe. I believe now," she whispered. "I know many things now I would never have believed, an hour ago. But the one thing I have always known—that I love you—Phaon."

"Not Marcius anymore?"

"Not Marcius," she said. "I'm not guiltless, Phaon. But remember, I was born into a world I didn't create. I want to stay with you voluntarily, not as a hostage. If you'll have me that way."

He took hold of her hand. "An ugly past has died tonight," he said. In his mind's eye he saw the rubble and the lifeless stones rising, rising to the stars in gleaming towers, and the atomfires blazing over the Earth.

"The past is dead, Rhea. We all get a new start, a new beginning tonight."

He started walking again, fast. She had trouble keeping up with him.

"Where—what's the hurry, Phaon?"

"There's a waterfall up ahead," Phaon said. "What we both need is an ice cold shower."

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THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN behind him and a voice murmured gently: "Good evening, Captain Flandry."

He spun around, grabbing for his stun pistol in a wild reflex, and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster. Slowly, then, he let his hands fall and stood taut, his eyes searching beyond the weapon, and the slender six-fingered hand that held it, to the tall gaunt body and the sardonically smiling face behind.

The face was humanoid—lean, hawk-nosed, golden-skinned, with brilliant amber eyes under feathery blue brows, and a high crest of shining blue feathers rising from the narrow hairless skull. The being was dressed in the simple white tunic of his people, leaving his clawed avian feet bare, but there were insignia of rank bejeweled around his neck and a cloak like a gush of blood from his wide shoulders. A Merseian.

But they'd all been occupied elsewhere—Flandry had seen to that. What had slipped up—?

With an effort, Flandry relaxed and let a wry smile cross his face. Never mind who was to blame; he

When the enemy comes up with a weapon against which there seems to be no defense, it's a fair bet that he has no defense against it, either. So you merely figure a variety of judo to fit the occasion. Simple? By no means!

was trapped in the Merseian chambers and had to think of a way to escape with a whole skin. His mind whirled with thought. Memory came—this was Aycharaych of Chereion, who had come to join the Merseian embassy only a few days before, presumably on some mission corresponding to Flandry's.

"Pardon the intrusion," he said; "it was purely professional. No offense meant."

"And none taken," said Aycharaych politely. He spoke faultless Anglic, only the faintest hint of his race's harsh accent in the syllables. But courtesy between spies was meaningless. It would be too easy to blast down the intruder and later express his immense regret that he had shot down the ace intelligence officer of the Terrestrial Empire

under the mistaken impression that it was a burglar.

Somehow, though, Flandry didn't think that the Chereionite would be guilty of such crudeness. His mysterious people were too old, too coldly civilized, and Aycharaych himself had too great a reputation for subtlety. Flandry had heard of him before; he would be planning something worse.

"That is quite correct," nodded Aycharaych. Flandry started—could the being guess his exact thoughts? "But if you will pardon my saying so, you yourself have committed a bit of clumsiness in trying to search our quarters. There are better ways of getting information."

Flandry gauged distances and angles. There was a vase on a table close to hand. If he could grab it up and throw it at Aycharaych's gun hand—

The blaster waved negligently. "I would advise against the attempt," said the Chereionite.

He stood aside. "Good evening, Captain Flandry," he said.

The Terran moved toward the door. He couldn't let himself be thrown out this way, not when his whole mission depended on finding out what the Merseians were up to. If he could make a sudden lunge as he passed close—

He threw himself sideways with a twisting motion that brought him under the blaster muzzle. Hampered by a greater gravity than the folk of his small planet were used to, Aycharaych couldn't dodge quickly enough. But he swung the blaster with a vicious precision across Flandry's jaw. The Terran stumbled, clapping the Chereionite's narrow waist. Aycharaych slugged him at the base of the skull and he fell to the floor.

He lay there a moment, gasping, blood running from his face. Aycharaych's voice jeered at him from a roaring darkness: "Really, Captain Flandry, I had thought better of you. Now please leave."

Sickly, the Terran crawled to his feet and went out the door. Aychar-

aych stood in the entrance watching him go, a faint smile on his hard, gaunt visage.

FLANDRY WENT DOWN endless corridors of polished stone to the suite given the Terrestrial mission. Most of them were at the feast, the ornate rooms stood almost empty. He threw himself into a chair and signalled his personal slave for a drink. A stiff one.

There was a light step and the suggestive whisper of a long silkite skirt behind him. He looked around and saw Aline Chang-Lei, the Lady Marr of Syrtis, his partner on the mission and one of Sol's loveliest women—as well as one of its top field agents for intelligence.

She was tall and slender, dark of hair and eye, with the high cheekbones and ivory skin of a mixed heritage such as most Terrans showed these days; her sea-blue gown did little more than emphasize the appropriate features. Flandry liked to look at her, though he was pretty well immune to beautiful women by now.

"What was the trouble?" she asked at once.

"What brings you here?" he responded. "I thought you'd be at the party, helping distract everyone."

"I just wanted to rest for a while," she said. "Official functions at Sol get awfully dull and stuffy, but they go to the other extreme at Betelgeuse. I wanted to hear silence for a while." And then, with grave concern: "But you ran into trouble."

"How the hell it happened, I can't imagine," said Flandry. "Look—we prevailed on the Sartaz to throw a brawl with everybody invited. We made double sure that every Merseian on the planet would be there. They'd trust to their robolocks to keep their quarters safe—they have absolutely no way of knowing that I've found a way to nullify a robo-lock. So what happens? I no sooner get inside than Aycharaych of Chereion walks in with a blaster in his hot little hand. He anticipates everything I try and finally shows me the door. Finis."

"Aycharaych—I've heard the name somewhere. But it doesn't sound Merseian."

"It isn't. Chereion is an obscure but very old planet in the Merseian Empire. Its people have full citizenship with the dominant race, just as our empire grants Terrestrial citizenship to many nonhumans. Aycharaych is one of Merseia's leading intelligence agents. Few people have heard of him, precisely because he is so good. I've never clashed with him before, though."

"I know whom you mean now," she nodded. "If he's as you say, and he's here on Alfzar, it isn't good news."

Flandry shrugged. "We'll just have to take him into account, then. As if this mission weren't tough enough!"

• HE GOT UP AND WALKED to the balcony window. The two moons of Alfzar were up, pouring coppery light on the broad reach of the palace gardens. The warm wind blew in with scent of strange flowers that had never bloomed under Sol and they caught the faint sound of the weird, tuneless music which the monarch of Betelgeuse favored.

For a moment, as he looked at the ruddy moonlight and the thronging stars, Flandry felt a wave of discouragement. The Galaxy was too big. Even the four million stars of the Terrestrial Empire were too many for one man ever to know in a lifetime. And there were the rival imperia out in the darkness of space, Gorraza and Ythri and Merseia, like a hungry beast of prey—

Too much, too much. The individual counted for too little in the enormous chaos which was modern civilization. He thought of Aline—it was her business to know who such beings as Aycharaych were, but one human skull couldn't hold a universe; knowledge and power were lacking.

Too many mutually alien races; too many forces clashing in space, and so desperately few who comprehended the situation and tried

their feeble best to help—naked hands battering at an avalanche as it ground down on them.

Aline came over and took his arm. Her white lovely face turned up to his, vague in the moonlight, with a look he knew too well. He'd have to avoid her, when or if they got back to Terra; he didn't want to hurt her but neither could he be tied to any single human.

"You're discouraged with one failure?" she asked lightly. "Dominic Flandry, the single-handed conqueror of Scothania, worried by one skinny bird-being?"

"I just don't see how he knew I was going to search his place," muttered Flandry. "I've never been caught that way before, not even when I was the worst cub in the Service. Some of our best men have gone down before Aycharaych. I'm convinced MacMurtrie's disappearance at Polaris was his work. Maybe it's our turn now."

"Oh, come off it," she laughed. "You must have been drinking *sorgan* when they told you about him."

"*Sorgan*?" His brows lifted.

"Ah, now I can tell you something you don't know." She was trying desperately hard to be gay. "Not that it's very important; I only happened to hear of it while talking with one of the Alfzarian narcotics detail. It's just a drug produced on one of the planets here—Cingetor I think—with the curious property of depressing certain brain centers such that the victim loses all critical sense. He has absolute faith in whatever he's told."

"Hm. Could be useful in our line of work."

"Not very. Hypnoprobes are better for interrogation, and there are more reliable ways of producing fanatics. The drug has an antidote which also confers permanent immunity. So it's not much use, really, and the Sartaz has suppressed its manufacture."

"I should think our Intelligence would like to keep a little on hand, just in case," he said thoughtfully. "And of course certain nobles in all the empires, ours included, would

find it handy for purposes of seduction."

"What are you thinking of?" she teased him.

"Nothing; I don't need it," he said smugly.

The digression had shaken him out of his dark mood. "Come on," he said. "Let's go join the party."

She went along at his side. There was a speculative look about her.

2

USUALLY THE GIANT stars have many planets, and Betelgeuse, with forty-seven, is no exception. Of these, six have intelligent native races, and the combined resources of the whole system are considerable, even in a civilization used to thinking in terms of thousands of stars.

When the first Terrestrial explorers arrived, almost a thousand years previously, they found that the people of Alfzar had already mastered interplanetary travel and were in the process of conquering the other worlds—a process speeded up by their rapid adoption of the more advanced human technology. However, they had not attempted to establish an empire on the scale of Sol or Merseia, contenting themselves with maintaining hegemony over enough neighbor suns to protect themselves. There had been clashes with the expanding powers around them, but generations of wily Sartazes had found it profitable to play their potential enemies off against each other; and the great states had, in turn, found it expedient to maintain Betelgeuse as a buffer against their rivals and against the peripheral barbarians.

But the gathering tension between Terra and Merseia had raised Betelgeuse to a position of critical importance. Lying squarely between the two great empires, she was in a position with her powerful fleet to command the most direct route between them and, if allied with either

one, to strike at the heart of the other. If Merseia could get the alliance, it would very probably be the last preparation she considered necessary for war with Terra. If Terra could get it, Merseia would suddenly be in a deteriorated position and would almost have to make concessions.

So both empires had missions on Alfzar trying to persuade the Sartaz of the rightness of their respective causes and the immense profits to be had by joining. Pressure was being applied wherever possible; officials were lavishly bribed; spies were swarming through the system getting whatever information they could and—of course—being immediately disowned by their governments if they were caught.

It was normal diplomatic procedure, but its critical importance had made the Service send two of its best agents, Flandry and Aline, to Betelgeuse to do what they could in persuading the Sartaz, finding out his weaknesses, and throwing as many monkey wrenches as possible into the Merseian activities. Aline was especially useful in working on the many humans who had settled in the system long before and become citizens of the kingdom—quite a few of them held important positions in the government and the military. Flandry—

And now, it seemed, Merseia had called in *her* top spy, and the subtle, polite, and utterly deadly battle was on.

THE SARTAZ GAVE A hunting party for his distinguished guests. It pleased his sardonic temperament to bring enemies together under conditions where they had to be friendly to each other. Most of the Merseians must have been pleased, too: hunting was their favorite sport. The more civilized Terrestrials were not at all happy about it, but they could hardly refuse.

Flandry was especially disgruntled at the prospect. He had never cared for physical exertion, though he

kept his wiry body in trim as a matter of necessity. And he had too much else to do.

Too many things were going disastrously wrong. The network of agents, both Imperial and bribed Betelgeusean—who ultimately were under his command—were finding the going suddenly rugged. One after another, they disappeared; they walked into Merseian or Betelgeusean traps; they found their best approaches blocked by unexpected watchfulness. Flandry couldn't locate the source of the difficulty, but since it had begun with Aycharaych's arrival, he could guess. The Chereonite was too damned smart to be true. Sunblaze, it just wasn't possible that anyone could have known about those Jurovian projects, or that Yamatsu's hiding place should have been discovered, or— And now this damned hunting party! Flandry groaned.

His slave roused him in the dawn. Mist, tinged with blood by the red sun, drifted through the high windows of his suite. Someone was blowing a horn somewhere, a wild call in the vague mysterious light, and he heard the growl of engines warming up.

"Sometimes," he muttered sourly, "I feel like going to the Emperor and telling him where to put our beloved Empire."

Breakfast made the universe slightly more tolerable. Flandry dressed with his usual finicky care; an ornate suit of skin-tight green and a golden cloak with hood and goggles, hung a needle gun and duelling sword at his waist, and let the slave trim his reddish-brown mustache to the micrometric precision he demanded. Then he went down long flights of marble stairs, past royal guards in helmet and corselet, to the courtyard.

The hunting party was gathering. The Sartaz himself was present, a typical Alfzarian humanoid—short, stocky, hairless, blue-skinned, with huge yellow eyes in the round, blunt-faced head. There were other nobles of Alfzar and its fellow planets,

more guardsmen, a riot of color in the brightening dawn. There were the other members of the regular Terrestrial embassy and the special mission, a harried and unhappy-looking crew. And there were the Merseians.

Flandry gave them all formal greetings—after all, Terra and Merseia were nominally at peace, however many men were being shot and cities burning on the marches. His gray eyes looked sleepy and indifferent, but they missed no detail of the enemy's appearance.

The Merseian nobles glanced at him with the thinly-covered contempt they had for all humans. They were mammals, but with more traces of reptilian ancestry in them than Terrans showed. A huge-thewed two meters they stood, with a spiny ridge running from forehead to the end of the long, thick tail which they could use to such terrible effect in hand-to-hand battle. Their hairless skins were pale green, faintly scaled, but their massive faces were practically human. Arrogant black eyes under heavy brow ridges met Flandry's gaze with a challenge.

I can understand that they despise us, he thought. Their civilization is young and vigorous, its energies turned ruthlessly outward; Terra is old, satiated—decadent. Our whole policy is directed toward maintaining the Galactic status quo, not because we love peace but because we're comfortable the way things are. We stand in the way of Merseia's dream of an all-embracing Galactic empire. We're the first ones they have to smash.

I wonder—historically, they may be on the right side. But Terra has seen too much bloodshed in her history, has too wise and weary a view of life. We've given up seeking perfection and glory; we've learned that they're chimerical—but that knowledge is a kind of death within us.

Still—I certainly don't want to see planets aflame and humans enslaved and an alien culture taking up the future. Terra is willing to compromise; but the only compromise Merseia

will ever make is with overwhelming force. Which is why I'm here.

● THERE WAS A STIR IN the streaming red mist, and Aycharaych's tall form was beside him. The Chereionite's lean face smiled amiably at him. "Good morning, Captain Flandry," he said.

"Oh—good morning," said Flandry, starting. The avian unnerved him. For the first time, he had met his professional superior, and he didn't like it.

But he couldn't help liking Aycharaych personally. As they stood waiting, they fell to talking of Polaris and its strange worlds, from which the conversation drifted to the comparative "anthropology" of intelligent primitives throughout the Galaxy. Aycharaych had a vast fund of knowledge and a wry humor matching Flandry's. When the horn blew for assembly, they exchanged the regretful glance of brave enemies. *It's too bad we have to be on opposite sides. If things had been different—*

But they weren't.

The hunters strapped themselves into their tiny one-man airjets. There was a needle-beam projector in the nose of each one, not too much armament when you hunted the Borthudian dragons. Flandry thought that the Sartaz would be more than pleased if the game disposed of one or more of his guests.

The squadron lifted into the sky and streaked northward for the mountains. Fields and forests lay in dissolving fog below them, and the enormous red disc of Betelgeuse was rising into a purplish sky. Despite himself, Flandry enjoyed the reckless speed and the roar of cloven air around him. It was godlike, this rushing over the world to fight the monsters at its edge.

In a couple of hours, they raised the Borthudian mountains, gaunt windy peaks rearing into the upper sky, the snow on their flanks like blood in the ominous light. Signals began coming over the radio; scouts had spotted dragons here and there, and jet after jet broke away to pursue

them. Presently Flandry found himself alone with one other vessel.

As they hummed over fanged crags and swooping canyons, he saw two shadows rise from the ground and his belly muscles tightened. Dragons!

The monsters were a good ten meters of scaled, snake-like length, with jaws and talons to rend steel. Huge leathery wings bore them aloft, riding the wind with lordly arrogance as they hunted the great beasts that terrorized villagers but were their prey.

Flandry kicked over his jet and swooped for one of them. It grew monstrously in his sights; he caught the red glare of its eyes as it banked to meet him. No running away here; the dragons had never learned to be afraid. It rose against him.

He squeezed his trigger and a thin sword of energy leaped out to burn past the creature's scales into its belly. The dragon held to its collision course. Flandry rolled out of its way; the mighty wings clashed meters from him.

He had not allowed for the tail. It swung savagely, and the blow shivered the teeth in his skull. The airjet reeled and went into a spin. The dragon stooped down on it, and the terrible claws ripped through the thin hull.

● WILDLY, FLANDRY slammed over his controls, tearing himself loose. He barrel-rolled, metal screaming as he swung about to meet the charge. His needle beam lashed into the open jaws and the dragon stumbled in midflight. Flandry pulled away and shot again, flaying one of the wings.

He could hear the dragon's scream. It rushed straight at him, swinging with fantastic speed and precision as he sought to dodge. The jaws snapped together and a section of hull skin was torn from the framework. Wind came in to sear the man with numbing cold.

Recklessly, he dove to meet the plunging monster, his beam before him like a lance. The dragon re-

coiled. With a savage grin, Flandry pursued, slashing and tearing.

The torn airjet handled clumsily. In midflight, it lurched and the dragon was out of his sights. Its wings buffeted him and he went spinning aside with the dragon after him.

The damned thing was forcing him toward the cragged mountainside. Its peaks reached hungrily after him, and the wind seemed to be a demon harrying him closer to disaster. He swung desperately, aware with sudden grimness that it had become a struggle for life with the odds on the dragon's side.

If this was the end, to be shattered against a mountain and eaten by his own quarry—He fought for control.

The dragon was almost on him, rushing down like a thunderbolt. It could survive a collision, but the jet would be knocked to earth. Flandry fired again, struggling to pull free. The dragon swerved and came on in the very teeth of his beam.

Suddenly it reeled and fell aside. The other jet was on it from behind, searing it with deadly precision. Flandry thought briefly that the remaining dragon must be dead or escaped and now its hunter had come to his aid—all the gods bless him, whoever he was!

Even as he watched, the dragon fell to earth, writhing and snapping as it died. It crashed onto a ledge and lay still.

Flandry brought his jet to a landing nearby. He was shaking with reaction, but his chief emotion was a sudden overwhelming sadness. There went another brave creature down into darkness, wiped out by a senseless history that seemed only to have the objective of destroying. He raised a hand in salute as he grounded.

The other jet had already landed a few meters off. As Flandry opened his cockpit canopy, its pilot stepped out.

Aycharaych.

The man's reaction was almost instantaneous. Gratitude and honor had no part in the grim code of the

Service—here was his greatest enemy, all unsuspecting, and it would be the simplest thing in the world to shoot him down. Aycharaych of Chereion, lost in a hunt for dangerous game, too bad—and remorse could come later, when there was time—

His needle pistol was halfway from the holster when Aycharaych's weapon was drawn. Through the booming wind, he heard the alien's quiet voice: "No."

He raised his own hands, and his smile was bitter. "Go ahead," he invited. "You've got the drop on me."

"Not at all," said Aycharaych. "Believe me, Captain Flandry, I will never kill you except in self-defense. But since I will always be forewarned of your plans, you may as well abandon them."

The man nodded, too weary to feel the shock of the tremendous revelation which was here. "Thanks," he said. "For saving my life, that is."

"You're too useful to die," replied Aycharaych candidly; "but I'm glad of it."

They took the dragon's head and flew slowly back toward the palace. Flandry's mind whirled with a gathering dismay.

There was only one way in which Aycharaych could have known of the murder plan, when it had sprung into instantaneous being. And that same fact explained how he knew of every activity and scheme the Terristrals tried, and how he could frustrate every one of them while his own work went on unhampered.

Aycharaych could read minds.

3

ALINE'S FACE was white and tense in the red light that streamed into the room. "No," she whispered.

"Yes," said Flandry grimly. "It's the only answer."

"But telepathy—everyone knows its limitations—"

Flandry nodded. "The mental pat-

terns of different races are so alien that a telepath who can sense them has to learn a different 'language' for every species—in fact, for every individual among non-telepathic peoples, whose minds, lacking mutual contact, develop purely personal thought—types. Even then it's irregular and unreliable. I've never let myself be studied by any telepath not on our side, so I'd always considered myself safe.

"But Chereion is a very old planet. Its people have the reputation among the more superstitious Merseians of being sorcerers. Actually, of course, it's simply that they've discovered certain things about the nervous system which nobody else suspects yet. Somehow, Aycharaych must be able to detect some underlying resonance-pattern common to all intelligent beings.

"I'm sure he can only read surface thoughts, those in the immediate consciousness. Otherwise he'd have found out so much from all the Terrans with whom he must have had contact that Merseia would be ruling Sol by now. But that's bad enough!"

Aline said drearily, "No wonder he spared your life; you've become the most valuable man on his side!"

"And not a thing I can do about it," said Flandry dully. "He sees me every day. I don't know what the range of his mind is—probably only a few meters; it's known that all mental pulses are weak and fade rapidly with distance. But in any case, every time he meets me he skims my mind, reads all my plans—I just can't help thinking about them all the time—and takes action to forestall them."

"We'll have to get the Imperial scientists to work on a thought screen."

"Of course. But that doesn't help us now."

"Couldn't you just avoid him, stay in your rooms—"

"Sure. And become a complete cipher. I have to get around, see my agents and the rulers of Betelgeuse, learn facts and keep my network operating. And very single thing I learn is just so much work done for

Aycharaych—with no effort on his part." Flandry puffed a cigaret into lighting and blew nervous clouds of smoke. "What to do, what to do?"

"Whatever we do," said Aline, "it has to be done fast. The Sartaz is getting more and more cool toward our people. While we blunder and fail, Aycharaych is working—bribing, blackmailing, influencing one key official after another. We'll wake up some fine morning to find ourselves under arrest and Betelgeuse the loyal ally of Merseia."

"Fine prospect," said Flandry bitterly.

● THE WANING RED

The sunlight streamed through his windows, throwing pools of dried blood on the floor. The palace was quiet, the nobles resting after the hunt, the servants scurrying about preparing the night's feast. Flandry looked around at the weird decorations, at the unearthly light and the distorted landscape beyond the windows. Strange world under a strange sun, and himself the virtual prisoner of its alien and increasingly hostile people. He had a sudden wild feeling of being trapped.

"I suppose I should be spinning some elaborate counterplot," he said hopelessly. "And then, of course, I'll have to go down to the banquet and let Aycharaych read every detail of it—every little thing I know, laid open to his eyes because I just can't suppress my own thoughts—"

Aline's eyes widened, and her slim hand tightened over his. "What is it?" he asked. "What's your idea?"

"Oh—nothing, Dominic, nothing." She smiled wearily. "I have some direct contact with Sol and—"

"You never told me that."

"No reason for you to know it. I was just wondering if I should report this new trouble or not. Galaxy knows how those muddle-headed bureaucrats back home will react to the news. Probably yank us back and cashier us for incompetence."

She leaned closer and her words came low and urgent. "Go find Aycharaych, Dominic. Talk to him,

keep him busy, don't let him come near me to interfere. He'll know what you're doing, naturally, but he won't be able to do much about it if you're as clever a talker as they say. Make some excuse for me tonight, too, so I don't have to attend the banquet—tell them I'm sick or something. Keep *him* away from me!"

"Sure," he said with a little of his old spirit. "But whatever you're hatching in that lovely head, be quick about it. He'll get at you mighty soon, you know."

He got up and left. She watched him go and there was a dawning smile on her lips.

• **F**LANDRY WAS MORE than a little drunk when the party ended. Wine flowed freely at a Betelgeusean banquet, together with music, food, and dancing girls of every race present. He had enjoyed himself—in spite of everything—most of all, he admitted, he'd enjoyed talking to Aycharaych. The being was a genius of the first order in almost every field, and it had been pleasant to forget the dreadfully imminent catastrophe for a while.

He entered his chambers. Aline stood by a little table, and the muted light streamed off her unbound hair and the shimmering robe she wore. Impulsively, he kissed her.

"Goodnight, honey," he said. "It was nice of you to wait for me."

She didn't leave for her own quarters. Instead, she held out one of the ornate goblets on the table. "Have a nightcap, Dominic," she invited.

"No, thanks. I've had entirely too many."

"For me." She smiled irresistibly. He clinked glasses with her and let the dark wine go down his throat.

It had a peculiar taste, and suddenly he felt dizzy, the room wavered and tilted under him. He sat down on his bed until it had passed, but there was an—oddness—in his head that wouldn't go away.

"Potent stuff," he muttered.

"We don't have the easiest job in the world," said Aline softly. "We

deserve a little relaxation." She sat down beside him. "Just tonight, that's all we have. Tomorrow is another day, and a worse day."

He would never have agreed before, his nature was too cool and self-contained, but now it was all at once utterly reasonable. He nodded.

"And you love me, you know," said Aline.

And he did.

Much later, she leaned close against him in the dark, her hair brushing his cheek, and whispered urgently: "Listen, Dominic, I have to tell you this regardless of the consequences; you have to be prepared for it."

He stiffened with a return of the old tension. Her voice went on, a muted whisper in the night: "I've called Sol on the secret beam and gotten in touch with Fenross. He has brains, and he saw at once what must be done. It's a poor way, but the only way."

"The fleet is already bound for Betelgeuse. The Merseians think most of our strength is concentrated near Llynathawr, but that's just a brilliant piece of deception—Fenross' work. Actually, the main body is quite near, and they've got a new energy screen that'll let them slip past the Betelgeusean cordon without being detected. The night after tomorrow, a strong squadron will land in Gunazar Valley, in the Borthudians, and establish a beachhead. A detachment will immediately move to occupy the capital and capture the Sartaz and his court."

Flandry lay rigid with the shock of it. "But this means war!" he gasped. "Merseia will strike at once, and we'll have to fight Betelgeuse too."

"I know. But the Imperium has decided we'll have a better chance this way. Otherwise, it looks as if Betelgeuse will go to the enemy by default."

"It's up to us to keep the Sartaz and his court from suspecting the truth till too late. We have to keep them here at the palace. The capture of the leaders of an absolute monarchy is always a disastrous blow—

Fenross and Walton think Betelgeuse will surrender before Merseia can get here.

"By hook or crook, Dominic, you've got to keep them unaware. That's your job; at the same time, keep on distracting Aycharaych, keep him off my neck."

She yawned and kissed him. "Better go to sleep now," she said. "We've got a tough couple of days ahead of us."

He couldn't sleep. He got up when she was breathing quietly and walked over to the balcony. The knowledge was staggering. That the Empire, the bungling decadent Empire, could pull such a stroke and hope to get away with it!

Something stirred in the garden below. The moonlight was like clotted blood on the figure that paced between two Merseian bodyguards. Aycharaych!

Flandry stiffened in dismay. The Chereionite looked up and he saw the wise smile on the telepath's face. *He knew.*

IN THE FOLLOWING TWO days, Flandry worked as he had rarely worked before. There wasn't much physical labor involved, but he had to maintain a web of complications such that the Sartaz would have no chance for a private audience with Merseian and would not leave the capital on one of his capricious journeys. There was also the matter of informing such Betelgeusean traitors as were on his side to be ready, and—

It was nerve-shattering. To make matters worse, something was wrong with him; clear thought was an effort; he had a new and disastrous tendency to take everything at face value. What had happened to him?

Aycharaych excused himself on the morning after Aline's revelation and disappeared. He was out arranging something hellish for the Terrans when they arrived, and there was nothing Flandry could do about it. But at least it left him and Aline free to carry on their own work.

He knew the Merseian fleet could not get near Betelgeuse before the

Terrans landed. It is simply not possible to conceal the approximate whereabouts of a large fighting force from the enemy. How it had been managed for Terra, Flandry couldn't imagine. He supposed that it would not be too large a task force which was to occupy Alfzar—but that made its mission all the more precarious.

The tension gathered, hour by slow hour. Aline went her own way, conferring with General Bronson—the human-Betelgeusean officer whom she had made her personal property. Perhaps he could disorganize the native fleet at the moment when Terra struck. The Merseian nobles plainly knew what Aycharaych had found out; they looked at the humans with frank hatred, but they made no overt attempt to warn the Sartaz. Maybe they didn't think they could work through the wall of suborned and confused officials which Flandry had built around him—more likely, Aycharaych had suggested a better plan for them. There was none of the sense of defeat in them which slowly gathered in the human.

It was like being caught in spider webs, fighting clinging gray stuff that blinded and choked and couldn't be pulled away. Flandry grew haggard, he shook with nervousness, and the two days dragged on.

He looked up Gunazar Valley in the atlas. It was uninhabited and desolate, the home of winds and the lair of dragons, a good place for a secret landing—only how secret was a landing that Aycharaych knew all about and was obviously ready to meet?

"There isn't much chance, Aline," he said to her. "Not a prayer, really."

"We'll just have to keep going." She was more buoyant than he, seemed almost cheerful as time stumbled past. She stroked his hair tenderly, "Poor Dominic, it isn't easy for you—"

The huge sun sank below the horizon—the second day, and tonight was the hour of decision.

Flandry came into the great conference hall to find it almost empty.

"Where are the Merseians, your majesty?" he asked the Sartaz.

"They all went off on a special mission," snapped the ruler. He was plainly ill pleased with the intriguing around him, of which he would be well aware.

A special mission—O almighty gods!

Aline and Bronson came in and gave the monarch formal greeting.

"With your permission, your majesty," said the general, "I would like to show you something of great importance in about two hours."

"Yes, yes," mumbled the Sartaz and stalked out.

Flandry sat down and rested his head on one hand. Aline touched his shoulder gently. "Tired, Dominic?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I feel rotten. Just can't think these days."

She signalled to a slave, who brought a beaker forward. "This will help," she said. He noticed sudden tears in her eyes. What was the matter?

He drank it down without thought. It caught at him, he choked and grabbed the chair arms for support. "What the devil—" he gasped.

It spread through him with a sudden coolness that ran along his nerves toward his brain. It was like the hand that Aline had laid on his head, calming, soothing—

Clearing!

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. The whole preposterous thing stood forth in its raw grotesquerie—tissue of falsehoods, monstrosity of illogic!

The Fleet *couldn't* have moved a whole task force this close without the Merseian intelligence knowing of it. There *couldn't* be a new energy screen that he hadn't heard of. Fenross would never try so fantastic a scheme as the occupation of Betelgeuse before all hope was gone.

He didn't love Aline. She was brave and lovely, but he didn't love her.

But he *had*. Three minutes ago,

he had been desperately in love with her.

He looked at her through blurring eyes as the enormous truth grew on him. She nodded, gravely, not seeming to care that tears were running down her cheeks. Her lips whispered a word that he could barely catch.

"Goodbye. Goodbye, my dearest."

4

THEY HAD set up a gaint television screen in the conference hall, with a row of seats for the great of Alfzar. Bronson had also taken the precaution of lining the walls with royal guardsmen whom he could trust—long rows of flashing steel and impassive blue faces, silent and moveless as the great pillars holding up the soaring roof.

The general paced nervously up and down before the screen, looking at his watch unnecessarily often. Sweat glistened on his forehead. Flandry sat relaxed; only one who knew him well could have read the tension that was like a coiled spring in him. Only Aline seemed remote from the scene, too wrapped in her own thoughts to care what went on.

"If this doesn't work, you know, we'll probably be hanged," said Bronson.

"It ought to," answered Flandry tonelessly. "If it doesn't, I won't give much of a damn whether we hang or not."

He was prevaricating there; Flandry was uncommonly fond of living, for all the wistful half-dreams that sometimes rose to torment him.

A trumpet shrilled, high brassy music between the walls and up to the ringing rafters. They rose and stood at attention as the Sartaz and his court swept in.

His yellow eyes were suspicious as they raked the three humans.

"You said that there was to be a showing of an important matter," he

declared flatly. "I *hope* that is correct."

"It is, your majesty," said Flandry easily. He was back in his element, the fencing with words, the casting of nets to entrap minds. "It is a matter of such immense importance that it should have been revealed to you weeks ago. Unfortunately, circumstances did not permit that—as the court shall presently see—so that your majesty's loyal general was forced to act on his own discretion with what help we of Terra could give him. But if our work has gone well, the moment of revelation should also be that of salvation."

"It had better be," said the Sartaz ominously. "I warn you—all of you—that I am sick of the spying and corruption the empires have brought with them. It is about time to cut the evil growth from Betelgeuse."

"Terra has never wished Betelgeuse anything but good, your majesty," said Flandry, "and as it happens, we can now offer proof of that. If—"

Another trumpet cut off his voice, and the warder's shout rang and boomed down the hall: "Your majesty, the Ambassador of the Empire of Merseia asks audience."

The huge green form of Lord Korvash of Merseia filled the doorway with a flare of gold and jewelry. And beside him—Aycharaych!

Flandry was briefly rigid with shock. If his brilliant and deadly opponent came into the game now, the whole plan might crash to ruin. It was a daring, precarious structure which Aline had built; the faintest breath of argument could dissolve it—and then the lightnings would strike!

It was not permitted to bear firearms within the palace, but the dueling sword was a part of full dress. Flandry drew his with a hiss of metal and shouted aloud: "Seize those beings! They mean to kill the Sartaz!"

Aycharaych's golden eyes widened as he saw what was in Flandry's mind. He opened his mouth to denounce the Terran—and leaped

back just in time to avoid the man's murderous thrust.

His own rapier sprang into his hand. In a whirr of steel, the two spies met.

Korvash the Merseian drew his own great blade in sheer reflex. "Strike him down!" yelled Aline. Before the amazed Sartaz could act, she had pulled the stun pistol he carried from the holster and sent the Merseian toppling to the floor.

She bent over him, deftly removing a tiny needle gun from her bodice and palming it on the ambassador. "Look, your majesty," she said breathlessly, "he had a deadly weapon. We knew the Merseians planned no good, but we never thought they would dare—"

The Sartaz's gaze was shrewd on her. "Maybe we'd better wait to hear his side of it," he murmured.

Since Korvash would be in no position to explain his side for a good hour, Aline considered it a victory.

But Flandry—her eyes grew wide and she drew a hissing gasp as she saw him fighting Aycharaych. It was the swiftest, most vicious duel she had ever seen, leaping figures and blades that were a blur of speed, back and forth along the hall in a clamor of steel and blood.

"Stop them!" she cried, and raised the stunner.

The Sartaz laid a hand on hers and took the weapon away. "No," he said. "Let them have it out. I haven't seen such a show in years."

"Dominic—" she whispered.

FLANDRY HAD ALWAYS thought himself a peerless fencer, but Aycharaych was his match. The Chereionite was hampered by gravity, but he had a speed and precision which no human could ever meet, his thin blade whistled in and out, around and under the man's guard to rake face and hands and breast, and he was smiling—smiling.

His telepathy did him little or no good. Fencing is a matter of conditioned reflex—at such speeds, there isn't time for conscious thought. But perhaps it gave him an

extra edge, just compensating for the handicap of weight.

Leaping, slashing, thrusting, parrying, clang and clash of cold steel, no time to feel the biting edge or the growing weariness—dance of death while the court stood by and cheered.

Flandry's own blade was finding its mark; blood ran down Aycharaych's gaunt cheeks and his tunic was slashed to red ribbons. The Terran's plan was simple and the only one possible for him. Aycharaych would tire sooner, his reactions would slow—the thing to do was to stay alive that long!

He let the Chereionite drive him backward down the length of the hall, leap by leap, whirling around with sword shrieking in hand. Thrust, parry, riposte, recovery—whirr, clang! The rattle of steel filled the hall and the Sartaz watched with hungry eyes.

The end came as he was wondering if he would ever live to see Betelgeuse rise again. Aycharaych lunged and his blade pierced Flandry's left shoulder. Before he could disengage it, the man had knocked the weapon spinning from his hand and had his own point against the throat of the Chereionite.

The hall rang with the savage cheering of Betelgeuse's masters. "Disarm them!" shouted the Sartaz.

Flandry drew a sobbing breath. "Your majesty," he gasped; "let me guard this fellow while General Bronson goes on with our show."

The Sartaz nodded. It fitted his sense of things.

Flandry thought with a hard glee; *Aycharaych, if you open your mouth, so help me, I'll run you through.*

The Chereionite shrugged, but his smile was bitter.

"Dominic, Dominic!" cried Aline, between laughter and tears.

General Bronson turned to her. He was shaken by the near ruin. "Can you talk to them?" he whispered. "I'm no good at it."

Aline nodded and stood boldly forth. "You majesty and nobles of the court," she said, "we shall now

prove the statements we made about the treachery of Merseia.

"We of Terra found out that the Merseians were planning to seize Alfzar and hold it and yourselves until their own fleet could arrive to complete the occupation. To that end they are assembling this very night in Gunazar Valley of the Borthudian range. A flying squad will attack and capture the place—"

She waited until the uproar had subsided. "We could not tell your majesty or any of the highest in the court," she resumed coolly, "for the Merseian spies were everywhere and we had reason to believe that one of them could read your minds. If they had known anyone knew of their plans, they would have acted at once. Instead we contacted General Bronson, who was not high enough to merit their attention, but who did have enough power to act as the situation required.

"We planted a trap for the enemy. For one thing, we mounted telescopic telecameras in the valley. With your permission, I will now show what is going on there this instant."

● **SHE TURNED A SWITCH** and the scene came to life—naked crags and cliffs reaching up toward the red moons, and a stir of activity in the shadows. Armored forms were moving about, setting up atomic guns, warming the engines of spaceships—and they were Merseians.

The Sartaz snarled. Someone asked, "How do we know this is not a falsified transmission?"

"You will be able to see their remains for yourself," said Aline. "Our plan was very simple. We planted atomic land mines in the ground. They are radio controlled." She held up a small switch-box wired to the television, and her smile was grim. "This is the control. Perhaps your majesty would like to press the button?"

"Give it to me," said the Sartaz thickly. He thumbbed the switch.

A blue-white glare of hell-flame lit the screen. They had a vision of

the ground fountaining upward, the cliffs toppling down, a cloud of radioactive dust boiling up toward the moons, and then the screen went dark.

"The cameras have been destroyed," said Aline quietly. "Now, your majesty, I suggest that you send scouts there immediately. They will find enough remains to verify what the television has shown. I would further suggest that a power which maintains armed forces within your own territory is not a friendly one!"

• **KORVASH AND Aycharaych** were to be deported with whatever other Merseians were left in the system—once Betelgeuse had broken diplomatic relations with their state and begun negotiating an alliance with Terra. The evening before they left, Flandry gave a small party for them in his apartment. Only he and Aline were there to meet them when they entered.

"Congratulations," said Aycharaych wryly. "The Sartaz was so furious he wouldn't even listen to our protestations. I can't blame him—you certainly put us in a bad light."

"No worse than your own," grunted Korvash angrily. "Hell take you for a lying hypocrite, Flandry. You know that Terra has her own forces and agents in the Betelgeusean System, hidden on wild moons and asteroids. It's part of the game."

"Of course I know it," smiled the Terran. "But does the Sartaz? However, it's as you say—the game, the great game. You don't hate the one who beats you in chess. Why then hate us for winning this round?"

"Oh, I don't," said Aycharaych. "There will be other rounds."

"You've lost much less than we would have," said Flandry. "This alliance has strengthened Terra enough for her to halt your designs, at least temporarily. But we aren't going to use that strength to launch a war against you, though I admit that we should. The Empire wants only to keep the peace."

"Because it doesn't dare fight a war," snapped Korvash.

They didn't answer. Perhaps they were thinking of the cities that would not be bombed and the young men that would not have to go out to be killed. Perhaps they were simply enjoying a victory.

Flandry poured wine. "To our future amiable enmity," he toasted.

"I still don't see how you did it," said Korvash.

"Aline did it," said Flandry. "Tell them, Aline."

She shook her head. She had withdrawn into a quietness which was foreign to her. "Go ahead, Dominic," she murmured. "It was really your show."

"Well," said Flandry, not loath to expound, "when we realized that Aycharaych could read our minds, it looked pretty hopeless. How can you possibly lie to a telepath? Aline found the answer—by getting information which just isn't true."

"There's a drug in this system called *sorgan* which has the property of making its user believe anything he's told. Aline fed me some without my knowledge and then told me that fantastic lie about Terra coming in to occupy Alfzar. And, of course, I accepted it as absolute truth. Which you, Aycharaych, read in my mind."

"I was puzzled," admitted the Chereionite. "It just didn't look reasonable to me; but as you said, there didn't seem to be any way to lie to a telepath."

"Aline's main worry was then to keep out of mind-reading range," said Flandry. "You helped us there by going off to prepare a warm reception for the Terrans. You gathered all your forces in the valley, ready to blast our ships out of the sky."

"Why didn't you go to the Sartaz with what you knew—or thought you knew?" asked Korvash accusingly.

Aycharaych shrugged. "I knew Captain Flandry would be doing his best to prevent me from doing that and to discredit any information I could get that high," he said. "You

yourself agreed that our best opportunity lay in repulsing the initial attack ourselves. That would gain us far more favor with the Sartaz; moreover, since there would have been overt acts on both sides, war between Betelgeuse and Terra would then have been inevitable—whereas if the Sartaz had learned in time of the impending assault, he might have tried to negotiate.”

“I suppose so,” said Korvash glumly.

“Aline, of course, prevailed on Bronson to mine the valley,” said Flandry. “The rest you know. When you yourselves showed up—”

“To tell the Sartaz, now that it was too late,” said Aycharaych.

“—we were afraid that the ensuing argument would damage our own show. So we used violence to shut you up until it had been played out.” Flandry spread his

hands in a gesture of finality. “And that, gentlemen, is that.”

“There will be other tomorrows,” said Aycharaych gently. “But I am glad we can meet in peace tonight.”

The party lasted well on toward dawn. When the aliens left, with many slightly tipsy expressions of good will and respect, Aycharaych took Aline's hand in his own bony fingers. His strange golden eyes searched hers, even as she knew his mind was looking into the depths of her own.

“Goodbye, my dear,” he said, too softly for the others to hear. “As long as there are women like you, I think Terra will endure.”

She watched his tall form go down the corridor and her vision blurred a little. It was strange to think that her enemy knew what the man beside her did not.



**“There's an error somewhere,
but I can't find it!”**

“I always end up with one equation that has two answers. Theoretically, one must be real and one must be imaginary ... but ...”

It seemed like merely a personal problem, but behind it was the reality of the

DARK RECESS

our next issue's feature story

by George O. Smith

plus two superfine novelets

- **ULTRASONIC GOD** by L. Sprague de Camp
- **THE BLACK ANT** by Walter Kubiak

*These and others
will appear in
our July issue*

FUTURE
combined with
SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

the Awful Weapon

by

Alfred Coppel

(author of "The Terror")

It was worse than fission bombs, fusion bombs, or any other kind of high explosive!

●
The object of war is to destroy the enemy's power to resist, as a rule. And that doesn't necessarily entail obliterating the enemy.

●
THERE WAS no tirade. The Russian delegate was stating facts, and he spoke quietly and with confidence.

"Gentlemen of the Security Council," he said, "there is nothing you can do. The Soviet Union has at long last reached parity with the West in the matter of atomic weapons. For every bomb that you can deliver to a Russian city, we can deliver one in return. No sane man will expect, therefore, to dissuade the Soviet government from its present course by threatening atomic war. For all practical purposes there can be no such thing. Our weapons cancel out. Stalemate—"

He looked across the semi-circular table at the row of grim faces and smiled urbanely.

"You seem disheartened, gentlemen. Believe me, you should be. The West has lost whatever advantage it may once have enjoyed. For every

division you can muster, the Soviet can produce five. Our tanks outnumber yours ten to one; our planes twenty to one." He paused for effect, and then continued easily. "It is therefore with the greatest pleasure that I—as representative of the Government of the Soviet Union—inform the Security Council that the capitalistic encirclement of the U.S.S.R. is no longer tolerable. Soviet troops will move west within the hour."

The Russian delegate stood waiting for the cries of protest that were bound to come, but the Council room remained strangely silent. Presently, the British delegate rose. "What few British troops are left in western Europe will have orders to offer no resistance," he said, and sat down.

The Russian delegate stared; this was more than he could have hoped for. The French delegate was nodding agreement, and the Danish and Dutch indicating assent.

The American delegate stood up. "Since there are no longer any American forces in Europe," he said, "there can be no resistance to Russian troop movements. What the Russian delegate has said concerning atomic weapons is quite correct. However, the Government of the United States feels it incumbent to warn the Soviet government that there are *other* weapons, and that Soviet forces would do better to remain where they are."

The Russian frowned. "Are you threatening? We, too, have biological weapons, remember. The same stalemate applies to those."

"I was not implying that the United States would indulge in germ warfare," the American delegate said. "I only suggest that the Soviet government restrain its appetite for territory."

The Russian laughed explosively. "You suggest?" He gathered his papers and stuffed them into a bulging briefcase. "With no troops available and only a single squadron of airplane based in England, the United States is in no position to suggest anything. You cannot use atomics or biological weapons; you are quite helpless."

"The United States will resist," the American delegate said quietly.

The Russian did not bother to reply. He jammed his briefcase under his arm and signalled to his staff. Like a squad of infantry, the black-suited delegation stalked out of the meeting room.

The British delegate looked at his American colleague. "This is it, then?"

"Afraid so."

The French delegate shrugged. "I am glad to have it over with at last."

"This weapon...?" The British delegate did not wish to seem over-curious, knowing how touchy Americans could be about security matters, but he really wanted to know.

The American grinned. "An awful weapon," he said. "This war will be hell...."

THE STRATOSPHERE WAS purple-blue, the stars shining with unnatural brilliance. The flat Asiatic landscape far below was lost in the murk.

The American plane was a fast-moving glitter against the static unreality of the sky. Deep within the craft, the radar screen showed the outlines of a Russian city. Leningrad. All over Russia, similar planes were finding other cities. Kiev, Novgorod, Pskov, Moscow.

Fighters were climbing fast into the stratosphere, straining to intercept the tiny invader, but the psychology of stalemate had slowed them down. It was already too late; bomb bay doors were opening in the fleet ship's belly.

Below, in the streets of the city, there was panic. Air-raid sirens screeched; the shelters were jammed with fearful humanity—all cursing the American killers who sought to shatter their city and their lives. Soldiers from the tremendous troop-concentrations nearby were trying to maintain a semblance of order, but terror-stricken mobs surged through the ancient streets.

Ten miles above the city, a mechanical brain in a bombsight muttered to itself, analysing, computing. At last an amber light flashed. Once. Twice. The light turned to red and



Strange things happened in Moscow.

the airplane surged upward, freed of its load.

Separated from the plane, the bomb arched downward, whistling eerily in the thin air.

Below, horrified radar operators watched the deadly golden speck plunge toward them. Long-forgotten prayers of long-forbidden religions formed on their frozen lips.

The interceptors turned away, scattering from the spot where the bomb would strike. The American plane vanished toward the north. All over Russia, American planes were disappearing like the one over Leningrad.

The bomb screamed earthward, twisting and turning. Then, five thousand feet above the teeming streets of the city it exploded with a ridiculous—

Plop!

A few shards of bomb-casing clat-

tered on rooftops and pavements. That was all.

PPIETR KALGANIN THEN stumbled out of the suffocating bomb-shelter with pounding heart. It was not the panic of the air raid that had frightened him, nor was it the thick, gloomy darkness of the blacked-out city.

It was the hour that set Pietr Kalganin's hands to trembling. Of course, he told himself, he could blame *some* of the delay on the raid—and possibly his wife might believe him. But she was getting suspicious. And Nadya Petrovna was such a jealous and violent woman! Pietr wondered bleakly why he had ever married her. The very sight of her huge, menacing bulk made his blood run cold with fear.

But soon, he thought excitedly, it would all be over. His nightly meetings with the girl in the apartment downstairs had given him courage; he'd get permission from the party cell to divorce Nadya, and then life would be really worth living again.

He had to be careful, though. Nadya had a dark mind. Only yesterday she had asked for his factory-worker's butter ration, and had flown into a rage when he said he'd lost it. He trembled to think what she might have done if she had known that he'd given it to the girl downstairs....

A strange sort of defiance swept over him as he walked. The night was thick and grimy with the stink of that foolish dud the Americans had dropped. He thought: *Why should I have given my butter to Nadya Petrovna?* The thought of her stuffing her fat face with it made him slightly ill.

The grim, shabby pile where he and Nadya shared a tiny apartment with her brother Mitka and his family materialized out of the gloom and Pietr's feet took him rapidly up the stairs. It would be just in and out tonight again, he thought with anticipation; the girl downstairs was waiting. But his lie would have to be more elaborate than usual in view of the fact that the raid had delayed him. He'd say there was a meeting of

the factory party cell. Nadya Petrovna wouldn't dare question that...

On the sixth floor, his door was open; Nadya stood peering around it like a huge, misshapen hawk. The apartment smelled of cabbage and too many people; but except for Nadya, it was quite empty.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

"Mitka went mad right after the bombing," his wife said. "An MVD man came to check through the building and Mitka told him he thought Comrade Molotov was a fat sausage—"

Pietr wasn't certain he had heard right. "He did *what*?" Mitka had always been a fool, but no one was that big a fool. Pietr decided it must be one of Nadya Petrovna's stupid jokes.

"No," Nadya insisted stolidly. "Mitka called Molotov a sausage and they took him away. Ilyena and the children went down to testify against him."

Pietr Kalganin shook his head. This was all beyond him. *Well*, he thought, *people come and go—I suppose Mitka has gone by this time.*

"I shall be going out again tonight, Nadya Petrovna," he said, "I—" Suddenly he felt peculiar. The lie was on the tip of his tongue, but it was entangled in that odd defiance he had felt walking home. He wanted in that moment to tell the simple truth. He was still talking; he could hear the sound of his own voice babbling, and he listened to it with a detached mixture of shocked horror and perplexed pleasure. "I am going to meet that girl downstairs. You know, the one you're so jealous of—that one. I was late because I was with her before the raid. I like being with her, too. Much better than being with you, Nadya Petrovna."

His wife stared at him in stunned disbelief. Then her huge face began to crinkle. She opened her mouth and released a rending, repulsive sob. "You've gone mad too!" she cried.

"Oh, no, Nadya Petrovna. I'm sane enough; I feel fine. Better than I have in months, in fact." He did, too. That was the strange part of it; he felt like singing.

Nadya began making gurgling sounds in her throat. For one breathless minute, Pietr thought that she might beat him; she was big enough, he told himself with unaccustomed unconcern. But she did not reach for the rolling pin that lay on the cluttered sideboard. She only emitted a catastrophic bellow and stumbled out the door. Pietr stood back and let her by.

He was thinking happily of the girl downstairs as his wife vanished down the musty hallway, still wailing at the top of her voice.

MAJOR VASILI ILYITCH SHAPOSHENKO ran an exasperated hand over his cropped blond hair. His heavy face was twisted into a grimace of absolute and utter frustration.

The tank column was hopelessly stalled. The world, Major Shaposhenko decided, had gone quite mad. Far down the column he could see his second in command engaged in a heated argument with a gunner. Directly under the turret of his own tank, a corporal was snarling invective at a company lieutenant. Everywhere, men were wrangling and voicing the most outlandish opinions.

Colonel Kulin, the regimental commander, had informed Shaposhenko less than one hour before that he personally thought the government was handling this whole stupid war very badly. He had also claimed that at the first opportunity, he was going to report Molotov to the MVD as a saboteur and an incompetent. Shaposhenko had listened with open mouth; he had heard more treason and sheer idiocy given voice in the last few hours than he had heard in the last fifteen years. It had all begun, he told himself, with that asinine dud the Americans dropped on Leningrad.

Shaposhenko shrugged the thought away. It was not his concern. His only duty was to get this infernal tangle of deserted vehicles and quarreling men moving west—

For the next two hours, Shaposhenko slogged through the snow, giving commands with voice and fist. But at the end of that time, there

was still no semblance of order. When he demanded compliance to duty, he got long-winded speeches or out-and-out vituperation.

It was beginning to rain. The Major returned to his tank and huddled miserably in the abandoned driver's seat.

Presently, Colonel Kulin arrived out of the rainy greyness. He had a bottle tucked under his arm. He looked very happy.

"Where did you get the vodka?" Shaposhenko demanded testily.

"From the MVD man," the colonel said pleasantly.

Shaposhenko recalled the sour policeman and made several mental reservations about the colonel's veracity—

"You're a liar," he said. His eyes widened; his own voice had said that. Of course, he had thought it for years, but—

Suddenly he smiled. It felt good to call Kulin a liar. Very good, indeed. He did it again. "I've thought you were a liar for years. Rather stupid, too."

Kulin blinked.

"In fact, we've all been liars. I'm tired of it; I'm tired of sitting here in this tin truck. I'm tired of the army and the party and just about everything else."

"That's odd. So am I."

The Major smiled. Perhaps Kulin wasn't as stupid as he thought. He took the bottle from the Colonel and drank thirstily. The vodka tasted good.

"I know a place where there is better vodka even than this," Kulin said. "Schnapps, too. And pink champagne."

Shaposhenko drew a deep breath. "Vienna?"

"Paris."

"Let's go."

The Major's tank roared. It moved out into the rainy afternoon. Soon it was lost to sight, the sound of its exhaust a happy purr fading away in the west. The soldiers of the stalled armored column watched it go disinterestedly and returned to their wrangling.

MARSHAL GORIN AND THE MVD man waited

musically on his broad chest. One simply did not divest a Marshal of the Red Army and a Hero of the Soviet Union in a cavalier manner. At least a simple MVD captain didn't.

The Premier would attend to it personally, and so the Marshal and the Captain waited in the vast empty hall at the foot of the ancient Red Stairs.

The Kremlin, Gorin thought with perverse pleasure, was very quiet tonight—in direct contrast to the riots that were surging through the streets of Moscow. Things were really in a pretty mess, he reflected. Desertions in droves from the armed forces; whole villages pulling up stakes and moving west; subordinates being insolent to just about everybody. The country in general, and Moscow in particular, was completely disorganized. Yet few lives had been lost. Here and there a soldier had knifed an officer and a man or woman an unfaithful spouse, but other than that the confusion was bloodless.

One had to admire the devilish cleverness of the Americans, Gorin decided reluctantly. This was their doing. Without firing a single shot, they had made the vast Soviet incapable of aggression. It was rather miraculous.

He looked down at the MVD man. Seemed a decent enough chap, though one could never tell about the MVD. Looked frightened, though. Probably awed by being ordered to arrest a Marshal. Gorin shook his head sadly. That fat sausage of a Premier! Trying to blame this insane debacle on his military men! Typical politician's reaction. If the army had overrun western Europe on schedule, he would have taken all the credit. Gorin's mouth twitched with disdain. He had never liked the Premier. Hated him, in fact. Despised him.

Shooting people wasn't going to help matters now. But that was the only thing the Premier did really well. What was needed was a little common sense, not corpses... Well, amended Gorin, one corpse wouldn't do any harm—not if it were the right one. Then a provisional government and peace with the west. After

that, fewer lies and less shooting of people. That was the thing.

He would have to take the Captain into his confidence, he decided. Even an MVD man couldn't make matters any worse. Gorin smiled. And then—as the Premier came down the Red Stairs—

Five minutes later, the government of the U.S.S.R. changed form...

•THE COMMUNICATIONS

Room of the U.N. headquarters in New York was dark except for the reflected glow from the tele-screen. The assembled members of the Security Council watched and listened to the image on the screen with mixed emotions.

"There is no use going on with this idiotic war," Gorin's image said. "Most of us never wanted it, and now that the authority is the hands of the Provisional Government, we request your peace terms."

"No terms, Gorin," the Secretary General said.

"You mean you want nothing from us?"

"Only self-determination for the small countries you have taken over directly or indirectly."

"Agreed!" Gorin beamed out of the tele-screen.

The American delegate grinned. "And you can't lie, can you Gorin?"

Gorin shook his head. "No, I can't. How did you do it?"

"The bombs contained a high concentrate of a secret scopolamine derivative. A truth serum."

Gorin coughed discretely. "Uh, when will it wear off? It makes certain...uh...personal relations rather...uh...unconventional, you know."

"I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it for a few months, at least. Once the molecules are dispersed in the air they combine with nitrogen to form a heavy compound. The winds can't blow it away. It will just take time, that's all. Meanwhile, no lying. Therefore no police-state. Simple as that."

"This will finish politicians," Gorin said happily.

There was a loud clatter outside the communications room and a panting courier burst through the

door. His face was ghastly pale. He drew the American delegate aside and there was a whispered conference.

Presently the courier rushed out of the room again, leaving the American delegate gaunt and grey-faced. The other delegates gathered about him, all asking questions at once.

He staggered to a chair and sank down into it like an old man. He looked around him bleakly.

"You know the plant at Aberdeen that has been making the scopola-

mine gas?"

The others nodded.

"It has blown up. Ten storage tanks of fifty million cubic feet—gone! *Dispersed in the atmosphere!*" His voice grew thin. "The wind is pushing it toward...toward Washington." He got to his feet and hobbled for the door, a man suddenly old before his time. He turned to face his colleagues, his haggard face contorted with horror.

"And...Oh, my God!..." He sobbed. "*This is an election year...*"

FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Publishers are requested not to send fantasy selections to this department, as the volume of science-fiction books fully occupies the reviewer's time and space.

LOOKING at the jacket of A.E. Van Vogt's "The Voyage of the Space Beagle", coming from Simon & Schuster, one would suspect that this is a slambang juvenile space-opera, on the order of "Captain Video", etc. Nothing could be farther from the facts in the case. Taking two novelettes and a short story—"Black Destroyer", "Discord in Scarlet", and "M-33 in Andromeda" (and an additional short story I did not see before)—Mr. Van Vogt has organized the material therein into a coherent and well-knit novel of space-exploration. The focus is mainly upon the ship and the men themselves, a huge expedition numbering hundreds, planned for many years' duration. The expedition is jointly run by the military and the "scientists", the latter group being split up into various bureaus, each with its own head.

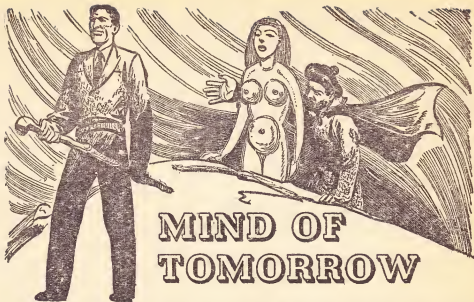
There are no women aboard, and Van Vogt tells us that the "problem of sex had been chemically solved by the inclusion of specific drugs in the general diet. That took away the physical need, but it was emotionally unsatisfying." This much given, we can turn our attention, as the author does, to what must necessarily ensue in such an environment—a sharpening of the struggle for power within the various groups, and with a few individuals, for command over the entire works—under the guise of efficiency, the glory of science, etc. While there is no "hero" in the usual sense, the leading person is Elliott Grosvenor, a young Nexialist, whose duty is to act as a coordinator and to set up coordination between the several scientific departments. "Nexialism", as the author explains, "is the science of joining in an orderly fashion the knowledge of one field of learning with that of other fields. It provides techniques for speeding up the processes of absorbing knowledge and of using effectively what has been learned." That some such art will be necessary in interplanetary expeditions, should such come about, cannot be doubted.

The expedition is faced with several crises from without, as well as the "political" problems within, and Van Vogt has his characters employ historical morphology to the various situations with convincing success. He draws heavily from the morphological theories of Oswald Spengler, which appear to be generally sound when one dispenses with Spengler's individual mysticism; none of this, fortunately, is crucial to his general morphological propositions. As Korzybski has noted, it does not matter whether all of Spengler's connections are sound, or whether each individual instance he cites "fits in"; such connections as he describes do undoubtedly exist, and our comprehension of human history becomes the richer for using his system.

As a story, "Voyage of the Space Beagle" maintains pace and interest from beginning to end, without getting bogged in unnecessary "action", although there is action in plenty. It emerges as one of Van Vogt's most finished and satisfying stories, and is well worth the \$2.50 that the publishers ask for it.

READ ONE at a time, at intervals of two months or more, the various tales of Lancelot Biggs, were moderately amusing when they appeared in magazine form; however, even then, one soon became aware of the fact that these were just extended gags set in a "spaceship" framework. The "science" was mostly double-talk; the situations sea-story slapstick, and the characters merely names dubbed on to stereotypes. To give the author, Nelson Bond, credit where it is due, he never tries to inflate his medium. The stories say nothing, and are not meant to say anything. There is nothing in them to make one think, or feel anything but the most second-hand feelings to be obtained from routine movies, etc. "Lancelot Biggs, Spaceman", then, is nothing but entertainment, and hardly intelligent en-

(Turn To Page 98)



Ehrlich dreamed of an old man bringing him a robot...

by Lester del Rey

(author of "The Last Lunacy")

When everything was in ruins, and the business of sheer existence occupied all of everyone's time, Justin Ehrlich's quest of a type-writer, with which he proposed to write a romantic novel, seemed unsane, at least!

PAUL EHRLICH looked up from his wheat-cakes in time to see his father exploding upward out of his chair and heading for the kitchen. By barking his shins against the table leg, he barely managed to catch the older man's arm and swing him forcibly back. The

sharp pain did nothing to decrease his irritation.

"Damn it, Justin, I told you to stop bothering Gerda, and I meant it! She has trouble enough trying to get her work done in sixteen hours without your upsetting her. Now sit down and eat—and let her alone!"

"Someday, Paul, I'm going to teach you I can still thrash you!" Justin Ehrlich dropped into the chair, but the rebellion on his face remained. "That butter is sour! I told her I would not eat sour butter."

"Then you'll go without, unless you want to build us a cream separator, so the milk won't have to stand long enough for the cream to rise. You can't make sweet butter

A picture of the world, a viewpoint, or orientation, etc., is not the world. It's an abstraction, at best an extended symbol of reality, and, as with any abstractions and symbols, it leaves out many characteristics, some of which may be crucial. But if the orientation does not include in the picture such gross distortions as a belief that this picture is true and complete, then there's a fair chance that the omissions may not be fatal. And a mechanical educator need not include premises of its own infallibility or the impression that it was relating the whole truth about the whole world, once and for all!

from sour cream. Besides, butter is a luxury; we're lucky to have cows!"

"Yeah. Gotta get a bull, though." Harry Raessler sopped up the last dribble of beet syrup with a scrap of pancake and pointed glumly through the crude glass window to the world outside the log and mud-brick house. "Tain't the same world you was born to, Mr. Ehrlich. My wife sure tries, but she's only got two hands. C'mon, Paul, we better get busy on that barn roof."

Paul nodded and followed his partner out, with a feeling of relief at leaving his father's contrariness behind. The old man must be getting senile, if his guess at the meaning of the word was correct. Complaints and grumbling! They were leading a life that would have been heaven to most of the people still alive—and few men over fifty were included in that group. He shook his head again, and went on splitting shakes off big pine blocks, while Harry began pounding the crookedness out of their small collection of rusty nails.

There had been a time when his father had seemed almost god-like to him, and he had to admit that their present wealth was only partly due to his own efforts. Justin had fled to MacQuarie Island when he foresaw the Fifth War, and his provision for the stay had proved as adequate as his selection of retreat had been wise. For over twenty years he had continued his research there, until the war burned from nations to villages and flickered out. And only then had he consented to the long dangerous voyage back.

But however well he had foreseen the consequences of the war, he had refused to adapt to them, once they were back, and the burden had been Paul's from then on. Nineteen years of the hell of material energy had done its worst; starvation had killed half of the world's surviving sixty million. Now they had reverted to a rude cross between early pioneer and normal farmer, and life was going on. At least there was land enough, much of it still good, though the

materials to farm it were mostly destroyed.

Still, Paul had done well enough. In the two years since the boat had docked and he had traded it for other things, he had tramped the country, bartering his way to the security of half this place, and pulling his father with him. And now, after three months partnership with the Raesslers, Justin...

• • **P**PAUL! DRAT IT, PAUL, where are you? Oh!" The old man came storming imperiously around the barn corner, swearing at the rubble under his feet and interrupting his son's bitter musing. "I thought you told me my equipment came yesterday. Where the devil did you hide it?"

Paul grimaced as he missed his stroke with the ax and ruined a roof shake. "In the woodshed. The men were too tired to go fooling around carrying it further, after ferrying it up the Snake River. And stop grumbling! You're lucky we had enough to pay barter for that job; I wouldn't fight the Snake for ten bulls and a tractor!"

"Lucky? Why do you think I picked the cargo for trade before I holed up? Why did I waste half my time getting you to study the agriculture books I took with me? Luck! D'you think I couldn't see what was coming? Though I never thought you'd pick a god-forsaken place like this. Now if I—"

"Sure," Paul interrupted him. "I know—you'd have rediscovered the Garden of Eden, with railroads! When you find better land, a safer place, or one where the people are half as well back to normal, I'll go with you. It only took me two years to find this... Your junk is in the woodshed, Dad!"

Justin grunted and then went hurrying off, muttering something about darned impertinence, while Harry looked up with a doubtful frown. "Shouldn't talk that way to your dad, Paul. After all, he did fix it up a blame sight better for you than most of us got. Some day you'll probably own all Idaho, soon's we get a

little further. Right now, we gotta farm any which way, but at least you know better. Runnin' away from the fightin' don't make the rest of us much shakes at it."

"Yeah, I know, Harry, but... Let's get up on the roof. We have enough here to patch it."

They were half-way up the ladder when a series of piercing screams from the woodshed culminated in a final whoop, and the figure of Justin came boiling out toward them. Paul sighed wearily, motioned Harry on up, and began climbing down to face the fury. Peace, it was wonderful! Not only did the old man do no work, when every hand was bitterly needed, but it was becoming impossible for others to work around him.

"All right, what is it?" he asked as he stepped through the door into which his father had retreated again.

"Look. Ruined! Absolutely ruined! I packed that typewriter myself, and now look at it!"

IT WAS A SIGHT, ALL right. Aside from a broken frame, twisted keys, and a thoroughly mangled mess of levers and wires, it bore almost no resemblance to a typewriter. "If I ever get my hands on your porters! Boiling in oil—hot lead in their boots—I'll fry them... The only typewriter I had, and look at it!"

The corner of the boy's lips twisted down, but he chuckled grimly at his father's rage. "If you want to swim down the Snake after them, go ahead. But it'd probably do more good to do your writing by hand."

"What!" Justin stopped at the top of his shriek, closed his mouth, and with the obviously masterful control needed in handling children, forced his voice to be reasonable. "We'll have to get another. Boise has been picked over, but I understand it escaped the worst, and nobody was looking for typewriters. You'll drive me to Boise tomorrow, and we'll dig till we find one."

He swung back into the woodshed and began sorting through his other belongings, while Paul headed back toward the barn and the common

sense of Harry. That last request, when the fields needed spraying and cultivating, would be too thick for even Raessler to swallow. Nuts to Boise!

But surprisingly, Harry took a different view of the matter. He screwed his face into thoughtfulness and rolled a cigarette before answering, but his tone was acquiescent when the words finally came. "Better go ahead, Paul. When a witch wants machinery, maybe it's a good idea he should get it."

"A what?"

"A witch—feller that goes in for hexin' and magic; like them that useta put ghosts out to fight against the soldiers. No, that's right, you wouldn't know about it—you wasn't here. Anyhow, people roundabouts figger your Dad's a witch. Mighty handy thing to have on your side, witches. You'd best drive him in; I'll spray the potatoes, and Gerda'll help, maybe."

"Magic is bunk," Paul told him sourly. "Your ghosts were probably some crude form of invisibility. I didn't learn too much of the old science, but I know enough not to believe in such things. And I'm not going to Boise. Come on, let's finish that roof before it gets too hot up here."

Gerda had enough to do without spraying potatoes, and Harry was already doing more than his share of the work. If Justin wanted to waste time, let him do it alone.

THERE WAS NO WIND IN Boise, and sweat was rolling down Paul's face as he dropped into the shade of the wagon and began unwrapping the lunch Gerda had fixed. Justin picked through a few more bits of rubble, and joined him. For once, the older man had been doing more than his share; he was tired enough to swallow three bites of his sandwich before he gagged and spat. "Sour butter! I told Gerda no butter—absolutely dry, like her danged bread!"

"So you pick on my sandwiches; yours are in the other bag. And Gerda's a damned good cook." Paul

washed his sandwich down with the warm, bitter homebrew, and studied the rubble of the former city with a large measure of doubt. "This has been picked dry, and we haven't the faintest idea where to look. Pure luck turned up that can of ANTU; if it'll kill rats as you say, it pays for the trip. But we won't find anything else. Why not give up?"

"Because I haven't found a type-writer! What's that?"

Paul shook his head and handed the little thing over. "Search me. I hoped you'd know some use for it. Funny looking can."

"Umm. Magnetric memory relay, looks like, under the dirt. Uh-huh, it is." Justin regarded it doubtfully, started to throw it away, and then gazed at it with new interest. "Know what that is, or have you forgotten?"

From somewhere in his memory, Paul dredged up the general idea. Science had stumbled on it accidentally, shortly after magnetic current was rediscovered and put to use. A colloidal suspension of metals in silicon jelly was provided with nodes; then connecting any two nodes would create a conducting, permanent link through the jelly, just as two facts cause a permanent and reusable link between brain cells. It could be taught by experience, after a fashion, since the linkages became increasingly more conductive with use. It had proven quite satisfactory in replacing telephone relays.

Justin nodded. "And adding machines. This is a double ten-node affair, so that's what it came from. Mostly, all business machines were sold in the same place, so I hope you're bright enough to remember where you found it."

IT TOOK THEM LESS THAN half an hour to sink the hole behind the wagon an additional six feet through the soft trash. Justin's pick broke into concrete first, and there was nothing weak about his attack on a four foot circle; the boy's arms were aching from pulling the stuff out when the cement finally broke. His father disappeared in

a shower of agonized curses and dust!

"Woof..." There was a fine vigor to the swearing, so no damage could have been done, and a second later the older man's head appeared below. "Come on, we hit a cellar they missed. Stinks, but the air's clearing. Throw me the lantern... Umm, two cellars, wooden framing cracked open between. Ladder over here ought to reach if I can get it through the hole."

But Paul wasted no time waiting for ladders. He'd seen the rake sticking out of a packing box, and the ax bits spilled from another frame of rotting wood. Axes and rakes! Another box fell open, revealing useless pick-handles, but a half-rotted shelf was stacked with the incalculable treasure of a hardware store's supplies. Not much, since the cellar seemed to have felt the edge of an energy beam—but enough to bring him to a speechless halt as he groped for realization of their luck.

Justin grumbled, seeing nothing of interest to him. The crumbled section of wooden partition broke through with a few strokes of his pick, and he was climbing through. Paul came in answer to his yell, but there was nothing except tiers of rotted paper and big books of some kind. Then his father jumped from an alcove and pointed to a stretch of ruined, earth-packed tunnel under the overlying concrete layer, running along the wooden partition.

"Used to be a stationery supply and business machine store over this. See that box! One of the adding machines the gadget came from. No good without magnetic generators, but if we dig that out..."

Paul turned back to his treasures. "You dig it out. If I have time after I load the stuff, I'll come back and help; though I can't see much chance in that mess. Unless you'd take time out to help load?"

But as usual, Justin's idea of co-operation was to follow his own interests, and the sound of the pick and shovel went on while Paul rigged a block and tackle to raise the lot. He loaded the wagon by him-

self, sweating over the inefficient hoist, and came back to find there was nothing else to be gleaned, even though he explored into the hard-packed dirt with his pick.

● **YOU LAZY LOAFER,** Paul, quit goldbricking and give me a hand!" His father was practically dancing in the hole between basements, his lips caked with sweat and dirt, but his voice as imperious as ever.

At the moment, though, Paul was too well pleased to let even that irritate him, and he followed the other through the twisting, dangerous tunnel, to come up against an opened box that held what was obviously a typewriter, and a sound one.

"Old keyboard, useless," Justin said, as he stooped to get his hands under it. "Dvorak keyboard was standard for fifty years, and they still made these things. Danged reactionaries! The good one's just beyond, see! Now, if you... Ugh! Wheeoo! I'll drag it out, and then there's another crate I found on your side of the partition—just machinery, but I can use it. Here! Or can you slide it along by yourself?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I guess so... Oof! Maybe we'd better break it open and leave the crate!"

"And lose half the pieces when it opened! Nonsense!" The old man grunted his way over the worst of the tunnel, saving his breath for cursing judiciously, until they were back to floor level. "May be more stuff here—at least it's one of the few unbeamed places the ruin pickers missed. When we get this up, you load it, and I'll cover our tracks. Then maybe, if you stop raising damfool objections to your father's better judgment, I'll tell you why I had to have a typewriter. I'd have done it years ago if you hadn't been so infernally curious."

But Paul was listening with only half his mind when the work was done and he took his place beside the two cows that were both draft and milk animals. His father was seated on the big crate, with his precious typewriter in his hands, al-

most at peace with the world, and the wagon's converted truck wheels jumped and wobbled over the ruins that had been a road leading homeward. His mind was far more concerned with the load than with the story.

Stripped of justification, exaggeration, and distortion, it was simple enough. His father had apparently had a typist copying his dictated material, and the normal errors—or abnormal ones, as he told it—had led to a fight. There had been a law-suit, another fight, a broken arm for the typist, and an injunction for Justin to cease and desist from slandering the typist by insisting a machine could do better work. It was all highly colorful and complicated, but it had ended with the old man swearing that he would build such a machine, and setting out to do so.

"And now, by the Lord Harry, with a decent typewriter, I'm going to prove for once and for all that he was just what I called him. Paul, you're going to see the typing an editor would appreciate. No errors, no erasures, no misspellings, and no passages left out! I'll finish the book, and finish it right!"

● **PAUL CHUCKLED.** "YOU mean you spent twenty years on that—all the time and trouble on the Island? Yeah, you would, though I'll admit it's probably why we're alive today. Too bad more people weren't rich enough to get out as you did."

"Rich and smart enough, don't forget," Justin corrected him with relative gentleness. His triumph was still strong upon him. "And if they had, they'd have taken the trouble along with them. You get a hundred people and you have an administration; get that, and it bogs down till it has to join the war to cover itself up! Sure I spent twenty years—I'd have spend a thousand, if I had them. I told him I'd prove he was everything I said, and I will!"

"Hardly, Justin. He's dead. You might look for his heirs, but I don't think you'd have much luck—not

even in twenty more years. Haw, Bessy!" He guided the cows over a hole in the road, noting their complaining, but deciding that they could wait three more hours for milking, probably. Might have to waste a little in partial milking, but they were already half way home.

Justin's peal of triumph cut through his thoughts and brought his mind back to his father. "Think I'm a fool, Paul? I told you I wasn't one of your lily-livered modern nincompoops! The swine had a daughter—a wonderful girl, son, wonderful; appreciated me! No, I won't have any trouble finding his heir. You're it!"

Paul shook his head, but he joined in the old man's laughter. For a moment he could feel a distorted form of the old awe for his father, though he knew the situation was ridiculous. Maybe Justin was a witch; at least, the whole Boise affair smacked of the miraculous. But witch or not, he was the only one of his kind!

Harry Raessler seemed to agree, as he took one look at the laden wagon and began hitching up their other two cows while most of it was unloaded. Definitely a witch, and a remarkable one! If Mr. Ehrlich would come along, maybe they'd have the good luck to find the stocktraders he'd heard about still around, and even get a fairly good bargain! Gerda came out and smiled shyly, assuring the old man that there was no butter on the supper she had packed for him, and everything was all sweetness and light.

● OF COURSE IT COULDN'T last. A heavy rain caught Harry and Justin returning, and ruined all plans to dig in Boise by making the roads impassable. Their triumphant acquisition of the entire stock of the traders—a bull, three horses, and a few hogs and chickens—lost some of its pleasures when the stallion behaved like a killer and the two half-starved mares proved to be completely unbroken.

Then in the morning, Justin had developed a case of sniffles, and dis-

covered that the cream for his barley-coffee was turning sour! Everything came back to normal with a thump. Gerda had retired to the kitchen in tears, and Paul had packed his father to his room with words he half regretted, half wished had been stronger.

Now Harry came back over the field and cut into his thoughts with a dark look at the clouds forming overhead. "Might as well get back, Paul. No use sprayin' any more when it's gonna rain. Well, we need the stuff, though why it can't spread out more even..."

"Yeah. You might ask my father; he's the expert on contrariness." Paul had begun to forget under the back-breaking pumping of the sprayer, but it all came back as they headed for the house. "Umm, what'd the man from Payette want? You were arguing over an hour."

"Wanted to buy our wrecked mower, to fix up one they found. I been holdin' out for a better offer, but now we don't need anything they got—so I'm tradin' a couple cross-cut saws and some ax bits for theirs. Heck, with that we can get swap-help from this whole section, a week's work for a day's mower use... And Paul, don't you go forgettin' it was your dad got us all that. He don't owe us one hour's work. I told you a witch was a good thing to have."

"He owes Gerda a civil tongue! Damn it, I don't mind too much doing his work, even without our sudden luck. But I can't stand his taking his spite out on you two."

"Yeah. It's kinda tough on her, what with the kid comin' and all. But mostly, she's glad he's here. We're gettin' too rich, and most like the rumor's gettin' spread around. Bandits hear that, and you wake up dead some night—unless they know you've got a witch, then they stay plenty far away... Go on in, I'll unhitch the cows." The rain was beginning to fall, but they had already reached the barn, and the machine gun sound of a typewriter drifted toward them. Harry cocked an ear toward it, with the awe of a man

who could only read by spelling out the words, but he made no comment.

• **PAUL WAS SLIGHTLY** surprised by the speed of the typing, himself, as he entered the house and began the slow filing of an adjustable slide for what might eventually be a hand corn-planter. His father must have developed some trick of pre-typing on a correctible tape that could be fed in finished form into the typewriter; no human fingers could move that rapidly. It was ingenious, but hardly worth twenty years of work; any engineer would have scorned wasting a week on it! And he'd thought his father was a scientist!

Still, even that might have been justified if the book had been some new mathematical theory that would necessitate almost impossible accuracy and freedom from typographical errors. Instead, it was to be a novel—a romantic, swashbuckling novel of the kind popular before the war, when there were still publishing houses and people with leisure to devote to escape mechanisms!

Paul gritted his teeth and forced himself to relax his pressure on the file before he ruined the slide. He'd seen real scientists in his two years of life as a wandering trader. There was old Kinderhook and Gleason, working with young Napier during the few hours when they were not slaving for their existence in the fields. They were fighting a losing battle, but at least they were fighting. And somehow, with month-long calculations a machine could have performed in seconds, they were bringing the old, involved theories down to a level where they might possibly be handled with the scanty materials remaining. While such men were attempting miracles with no resources, his father sat comfortably dictating a stupid, anachronistic novel!

But the rapid typing had become sporadic, now that he listened again, and there was a mutter of cursing, followed by a brief burst of typing, and a yell. "Paul! Paul!" He climbed to his feet with a disgusted

sigh, and went toward the room before the other could come storming out to disturb the whole household.

"Yeah, what is it this time?"

His father stood in the middle of the floor before a complicated mess of machinery. There was a small wood-fired steam boiler and engine, set up on flat rocks and puffing smoke out the window, a humming dynamo, and the typewriter, all connected to a squat black box with tiny arms over the type keys and an arm up near the platen. Justin shook his fists impotently at the box.

"Ruined, d'you hear, ruined! If I had a boat, I'd find those idiot porters! Twenty years of work, and misbegotten..."

Paul grunted wearily. "And if I had a boat, I'd let you go chasing down the Snake after them. What the deuce is this mess?"

"This mess," his father told him with heavy sarcasm, "is a voice-operated typewriter—and one that works! Or did work! Not like the hundred tons of junk the Institute had that couldn't punctuate or separate homonyms—or be operated by more than a single trained speaker. My Vocatype worked, until it was shipped here. Now it's ruined!"

• **IN SPITE OF HIMSELF, THE** boy was impressed, though he couldn't be sure without testing it whether by the achievement or the mere claim to it. He picked up the microphone, pressed the button, and spoke quick words into the machine. "The mill wright could not attend the sacred rite, but he could write the right letter to right the false impression. Two apples fell to the ground too rapidly. The man with the bow had to bow to the queen."

There were no mistakes!

"But a billion relays..." And the box couldn't weigh over a hundred pounds! He stood in frozen wonder, waiting for his father's explanation. And this time he gave the account full attention, even to the boasting.

The voice-analyzer and key magnets were old stuff, as were the scanning eyes to detect failure from the typewriter and the transformer

that changed electricity to magnetic current. The rest was as simple as its theory was complex. A thousand-node magnetronic memory tube of his father's own construction occupied a little corner of the box and did the real work. Between its nodes, half a million links could be formed, serving as nodes for over a hundred billion sub-links that broke down to quintillions of sub-sub-links. It was of unusual size and complexity, but it had taken only a few months to build.

The rest of the long years had been spent in pronouncing words and striking keys until the tube developed a conditioned reflex for every one in the abridged dictionary and could begin the seemingly hopeless task of learning to choose between alternate forms and somehow find a pattern of punctuation that worked. No normal man would have believed it possible, and only the stubbornest man in the world would have kept trying until success crowned his herculean labors.

"Now it's ruined," Justin finished, and the attention and surprise of his son must have mollified his anger, for there was only bitterness left in his voice. He picked up a sheet of his shorthand notes and began dictating, while the machine raced along slightly behind him. "...as sure as my name's Patrick Xenophon...Look! ...'as sure as my name's Patrick Xavier!" Twenty times I've said Xenophon and twenty times it's written Xavier. All my conditioning of its reflexes ruined—all to be done over!"

Paul scratched the letters off the page with the point of his pocket knife, and filled in the proper ones by hand typing. "That wouldn't occur to you, I suppose," he began when a click from the machine called his eyes back. It had tossed the sheet out, inserted a fresh one, and begun typing the page again. When it finished, its original version was back before them!

Justin stared at his creation for long moments in horrified surprise, while his shoulders dropped slowly. Then, with a broken sound, he hand-

ed over the pages of his notes and finished copy and moved quietly out of the room. Minutes later, Paul saw him moving slowly through the rain down the path to the barn, with Gerda at his heels. And the girl was smiling!

The boy looked from the machine to their retreating forms and down at the pages he held. Then he dropped limply into the chair.

● GERDA CAME IN HOURS later to force his supper on him and light the lamp, but he only grunted his thanks, and went on reading. Surprisingly, it was a marvelous piece of escape literature, masterfully written. Once the words on the first page had penetrated his dazed mind, continuing was as inevitable as breathing. In a way, it was a pity it could never be published; the need of really effective escapism had never been greater.

And it was effective, in a strangely soothing way. At first he had meant to stop after the first chapter, but by then he knew the need of the relaxation it afforded, and he went on, letting the real world around him disappear from his mind. Besides, if its writing had meant twenty years of work for its creator, there should at least be one person who would get some good out of it!

He put down the last page and went over to the machine, where the unfinished book ended. "...as sure as my name's Patrick Xavier..." Patrick Xavier O'Malley, it should have been, or Patrick Xenophon...

"Justin! Hey, Justin!" His bellow was almost the equal to his father's usual cry, but he had no chance to think of the similarity. When the door opened, his finger was already on the passage, and shaking it under the older man's eyes. "You *did* name him Xavier, not Xenophon! Look at Page Four!"

Justin took one startled look at the page, and picked up the microphone. This time there was no hesitation as the Vocatype followed his words to the end of the page, and kicked out the finished product. Then he chuckled.

"Sometimes I almost think I'm stubborn, Paul. I'd have sworn I was right, so I didn't think of checking. Do you realize what this means—a machine that is designed to take dictation, but won't do it unless the dictation is consistent with its facts? Why, it's a perfect secretary! Teach it a little mathematics, and think of the errors it would save when writing up a piece of research. Paul, for once you've actually made yourself useful!"

The boy opened his mouth to answer that, but Justin gave him no chance. He was carressing the machine, and fairly burbling.

"Now we can finish the book," he told it, and gave it another affectionate pat. "Nice machine—excellent machine! We'll show him that his grandfather was a bigoted moron yet! By the way, boy, how was the yarn?"

"Perfect," Paul answered, and swung out of the room and toward his bed without trusting himself to further insanity. Only his father could have invented such an impossibility as a machine capable of showing the rudiments of intelligence. And only Justin would have used it to finish a romance that could never be published.

But as he crawled between the sheets, he was less sure of his father's misuse of it. Perhaps, somewhere in its mysterious sub-linkages, it contained potential intelligence, but it could never be made available in their life-times. Thought is useless without a medium of communication, and while it could learn facts, language is a protoplasmic by-product, filled with such abstract and fact-confusing variables as *truth* or *goodness*!

He dreamed of standing on a cliff while a blind man offered him a shiny new robot, if he could only describe green and orange.

IT WAS BARELY DAWN when Justin's hand on his shoulder roused him, and for a moment he thought he was still on the Island. Reality came back, though, as he groped for his overalls. His

father's eyes were red with lack of sleep, but filled with a gamut of emotions.

Justin broke the silence in a voice that was more gentle than he had used for years.

"I know what you think of me, Paul, but I never forgot the real world. Knowing I'd fail, I fought for decency as few men have ever fought, and it wasn't until the last minute that I fled... No, let me tell it my way... Integrating the administration of an advanced technological world is inconceivably complex—even the men doing the job have only a vague idea of how complex! The broad policies depend on the results of lesser departments, and so on through fifty stages vertically and untold horizontal subdivisions. Red-tape isn't funny; it's necessary and horrible. Complication begets complication, and that begets disconnection from reality. Mistakes are made; no one can see and check them in time, and they lead to more errors, which lead to war.

"For a while, they fight against it. And then they simply fight! I did all I could, and I failed. On the Island, there was nothing to do about it, so I built the Brain. Here, why should I struggle to recreate the old vicious circle that will wind up with the whole race wiped out? I tried to prepare you, but I couldn't prepare myself for this!"

"If you'd explained..." Paul began weakly, but his father brushed it aside, and went on.

"But now something can be done! Government *can* work. All it needs is a brain to handle the red tape—not better, but more complicated than human brains—a few tremendous minds with perfect memories to hold the multitudinous interlocking correlated compartments. Let men make the decisions, but let robot brains free them to do it wisely—and move instantly, where red-tape would take years! Paul, we'll give them the brains."

"No, Dad," the boy said softly, and cursed the inherited stubbornness that refused to leave his father in the new-found fantasy world. "Maybe

someday, they'll have those brains, and you'll be responsible. But not in our time. You taught me enough semantics to know just how impossible the job of giving your gadget even a shadowy knowledge of words is going to be."

• **T**HERE WAS NO SIGN OF disappointment on the old man's face. It stiffened, and the perverse stubbornness reappeared, but he made no answer. Instead, he motioned his son after him, and went silently across to the Vocatype room. On the machine was a little slip of paper, and there were other bits under the readjusted scanning eyes.

"The trouble is, you think knowing electricity works a motor is science, Paul. It isn't. Science is the process of reducing all things to their lowest common denominator and building systematically from there. I had the training before I turned novelist, and I still have it. I didn't waste the night dreaming.

Check that list of words while you watch." Justin handed the slip over, and began arranging pieces of colored paper under the eyes of the scanner.

"What?" he asked as the machine sprang to humming life. "What?"

Fresh paper fed into the typewriter, and the words came slowly: "*A blue triangle and a red circle is on a white square. A black circle is on a what? What?*"

"Hexagon," Justin answered quietly.

"*A black circle is on a hexagon. The hexagon is orange. What color is orange? The hexagon is orange? What color is orange?*"

Paul's startled eyes narrowed as he stared at the sheet of paper. "Orange isn't listed among the words!"

"Of course not—I never taught it to the Brain. But it pulled the same trick on me before I woke you up." The old man pressed the microphone button and addressed the

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machine. "Orange is the color of the hexagon. The hexagon is orange! What color is orange?"

The keys clucked. Then the page ripped out and a new one was inserted. With no further stalling, words began spilling onto the paper:

*The Luck of O'Malley Page 119
had to be true; the fact was as
certain as the axioms of geom-
etry, or the basics of physics.
Invariably, a mixture of red and
yellow is orange.*

It skipped a space, and added another line. "*The hexagon is red and yellow. The hexagon is orange. What color is hexagon?*"

"Orange. Red and yellow is orange," Justin assured the doubtful machine, and shut it off. "You see, it has a perfect memory, as well as a sense of analysis. And it would have to have some vague sense of word-purpose to separate homonyms, as I see it now. Anyhow, I've already established the fuzzy distinction between *a* and *the*, so it may take years, but not centuries... And that's that for today. Let's see if we can find something to eat!"

PAUL'S BRAIN WAS reeling giddily as he watched his father begin slicing the bread, but the broad plan was already crystallizing, and he had no doubt of its success. They'd have to get Gleason, Kinderhook, and Napier to join them here, where the new-found wealth would permit leisure for their all-important work. At first they would have to depend on swap-help, but as wealth created wealth, they could expand. The Brain could be turned into a calculator infinitely better than the older ones with a little teaching, since mathematics is an exact language. And with the materials they could somehow find now, the slow beginnings of science would provide still more wealth to build on.

They'd have to organize the community out of its present anarchy, so some could be assigned to farm and others to teach and to think. That would be hard in a world that had learned to shun all forms of government from bitter experience.

But while the Brain was as yet no perfect administrative machine, it would be mighty magic among the superstitious people. His father could coach it and develop his reputation as a witch until the obvious advantages of organization made such deception useless.

Perhaps it would be better to keep the Brain a secret, though. But in any event, the knowledge and hope for the future it offered would make all the rest possible.

"Um-hmm," Justin muttered around a mouthful of bread. "I think everything's going to be all right now, son. But when I see Gerda—"

And Paul's dream collapsed! It had been a nice illusion, but no stable future could be built on a hatred of sour butter. He swung toward his father, and his mouth was white and tense, so that the words had to be forced through his teeth. "I told you to let her alone, Justin! If I ever—"

"Umm. But you might take a look out the window and wait till I finish," the old man answered, and there was a grin on his lips. "While I was trying to figure out what was wrong with the Brain, I got around to unpacking that other crate I found on your side of the partition. Gerda and I had a time replacing the motor with a crank, but we made it."

Paul swallowed his rage slowly, and turned to look through the little pane of glass toward the barn. At first he saw only the bobbing back of Harry, but as the man stepped aside, the other things became visible. Gerda apparently wanted to try her hand, for she was smiling as she began turning the crank and two streams of liquid fell into the waiting pails. The cream separator was working quite satisfactorily!

"As I was saying, before you interrupted—when I see Gerda..." Justin took another bite of the yellow-smears bread, and smacked his lips approvingly. "When I see her, I must compliment her on what she churned last night. Very nice. I never could stand sour butter!"



A million fragments spread
in the sky.
(illustration by Fawcette)

FUN

can last

Forever!

by J. Harvey Haggard

The kids found the war exciting enough, but it began to get tiresome . . .

"MUMMY, what is war?"
"Hush dear!"
"But Mummy..."

"Now child, it's your bedtime. Why do you persist in asking such questions? Say nity-nite before Mummy gets cross. Go to sleep like Mummy's baby boy."

"I'm no baby neither. I'm seven. Three years older than Gracie..."

"Eldon dear..."

"And Gracie says all the world is

From our viewpoint, Earth has contained life for aeons. But from other viewpoints in the space-time continuum, an aeon isn't long. And if all life were destroyed on Earth, it might come back in a little while, relatively speaking . . .

flaming at war and we're fighting on the moon and..."

Tick, tick, tick, tick...

He heard the clock. No, it wasn't a clock now; it was a chrono. Sometimes Mummy called it a clock, but on one of those rare occasions when Daddy could visit he had said once that Mummy was what you might call old-fashioned and...

He opened his eyes wide and screamed in terror. He'd been dreaming. There was a big round window in the ceiling above; it was six inches thick and made of plasticite. The last time his daddy had come in uniform he'd heard him say proudly it was bombproof. Nothing could crash it, not even the A-bomb. He'd told Gracie his little sister about that.

Mummy cuddled him to her soft forehead and kissed him. "There, there, dear. It's only a dream."

"But the moon..."

"Now quit your crying. There's nothing wrong with the moon."

"You said Daddy's there...on the moon. And it's all water."

Mummy looked up and held her hand to her breast. You could see the moon in the dark sky. But an awful roaring sound was shaking the place. Then Mummy saw it too, a great splash of water that leaped up against the sky and fell back down again. Water, water, everywhere. Only it wasn't on the moon; it was here on earth. The oceans were going wild, swallowing everything.

A rescue helicopter came to the building where it protruded like an island. Every single time it left, it took people who fought wildly for places. The tenth time it came back to their rooftop, Eldon was lifted up into the insides of it after his little sister. Then the wrinkled, worried old man had reached down and helped Mummy in. She looked tired but when Gracie fell and dirtied her pants she was sore as anything. She had to make a change right there with more than a dozen others squeezed in like sardines.

"Shamy, shamy on you, Gracie."

"Shut up, Eldon! It wasn't her fault. Oh, Gracie, I ought to shake

you good." A four year old girl ought to know better.

"Anything to help, ma'am?" It was the tired old man who seemed to be in charge.

"No...yes...watch the bags please, if you will."

"They'll be all right." The old attendant was very cordial. He had a curious scar across his face. He limped as though one leg was artificial. Sometimes a boy might get a chance to sit on his knee and...

"Oh, but aren't you Commander Leinstrom's wife? I mean the Commander?"

Mummy smiled and looked very proud.

Eldon straightened up. "That's my dad. He's on the moon, fighting the Mongoms."

"You've got a right to feel very proud, young man."

• THEY GOT INTO A BIGGER

ship that was like a big cigar. It rose in the air and fought a gale over the coast. They went over what was left of Los Angeles. They could look down into the churning water and see a spire sticking out at an angle. That was what was left of the city hall. It was the only building the water hadn't flattened.

Where they went it was mountainous and rocky.

There were rooms dug in the mountains. Women dressed in dirty overalls and did all the work; women flew the airships. There were a few old men. Sometimes when the moon was bright everybody got out on the mountain and looked up at it. They tried to count the new bomb craters.

It was hard to tell where an H-bomb had ripped out a hole, or where one of the old craters had existed for ages. Sometimes you could even see a glimmer where some of the big boys were exploding.

"Damn the Mongoms! They're fighting it out on the other side, the black side!" That was Gretchen. She was big and coarse and had a sweet-heart who was a space-gob; she swore and drank. But she looked softly at the children. Once she said she'd like to have a dozen of them

if Olaf ever came back. Olaf wasn't back. He was somewhere over on the other side of the moon, fighting like hell.

"Damn them! Oh damn them all to hell! Why did they have to go to the moon?"

"I'm hungry," wailed Eldon. Gracie began to whimper. She had come out in only her undershirt and he watched for her to catch it when his mother saw. But his Mummy, like everyone else, was staring at the moon.

The man in the moon wasn't smiling.

His face was scarred and ugly. You couldn't see the features of the old woman carrying sticks. You saw craters yawning everywhere. You knew the craters were full of soldiers, holed in. Half of the soldiers were the Am-Feds, and the other half Mongoms. They were holed in while the space-fleets met on the other side of the moon. It had been a race to see which one established a base on the moon. They both had reached the moon about the same time.

Boom! Nobody could hear it over in the airless void around the moon. Boom! Another H-bomb. One every minute, tearing hell out of a big hole in the moon.

"Eldon!"

A hand slapped his face.

"You said hell!"

"I didn't, Mummy. I didn't."

"Yes did, Mummy. I heard him."

"Gracie... get your clothes on! Oh my God I don't know what's gonna happen to us all, sometimes."

"Oh damn them all to hell!" snarled Gretchen, shaking a big bottle of hootch. She tipped it up in the air, emptied it with lusty gurgles. Then she screamed at the moon out over the dark abyss. "Damn all you Mongoms. I wish you had your rocket base in the depths of hell and your souls were rotting green. I know goddam well I'll go crazy if Olaf don't come back."

Mummy had put an arm around Gretchen's shoulders.

"Remember my man's over there too," she said proudly. "He's in the space-fleet."

"Speak to him then!" yowled Gretchen and her face was terrible. "Get on a radio-beam and tell him to hurry up and blow all hell out of those Mongoms..."

"But I can't, Gretchen dear. We can't communicate with them. There's no way a radio-wave can pierce the Heaviside Layer. We've just got to sit tight and wait and pray. Then when they win, why the war is over. Once they have the moon-base they have everything."

"I hope they get it!" sobbed Gretchen brokenly. "I hope they get it. Then they can throw an A-bomb down at any city they want and any place they want. They can blast the Mongoms off the face of the earth."

"Hiyi, Grace. I gotta A-bomb. I gotta A-bomb."

Eldon had a rock. He acted like he was going to throw it.

"Me gotta H-bomb," said Gracie, falling into a well-known game. She stooped and picked up another stone and before Mummy could stop her she threw it. It hit smack on his forehead; Eldon didn't remember anything for awhile.

He had a throbbing headache next morning.

THEY ALL HAD HEAD-ACHES next morning. A hurricane tore the face off the mountain. Most of the airships were flung like leaves in the wind and smashed.

Everyone began to get afraid. Food had to be brought in. Word was coming in from the grain fields of earth. They were aflood. They were ruined.

The children were herded together in a big room under a single electric light.

There were swings to swing on. There were slides. There were beach-balls. There was a big hill of sand. There was a place where water was piped for swimming. There were play-houses with play furniture. There was places where the pets were kept.

"Where's Tag?"

"Where's Spit, and my cat, Mimi! Oh, where have they gone?"

Nobody played that day. Most of

the children were cross and had to be scolded.

Gretchen said, "Oh, hell, why don't you tell the kids the food is low? They might as well know."

"I don't think it's right," said Mummy. Her hair was stringy and she looked gaunt.

"But if anything should happen," snorted Gretchen doggedly, "anything like that, why it's their world. It's their world."

"Gretchen, I'll slap your mouth."

"Dammit, Helen, you heard what the communicator said last night. It's taking too long. Too long on the moon. And those H-bombs, blasting at it, are slowing it in its orbit, driving the moon closer to earth, like jets. If something isn't done real quick..."

New York was gone. They played like a black stretch of sand was what was left of New York. Gracie laid down like the statue of liberty, which had fallen under a huge welter of ocean waters that slammed at the coast.

England, the whole island was gone. All the continental coast lines. And the great cities, one by one. Paris, Berlin, Mexico City...

"It's tidal force, children. Do you understand, it's tidal force. Nothing to be afraid of, children. Come, let me tell you a bedtime story. One time there were three bears..."

Eldon had a fever. They gave him vitamin-shots; they gave him pills; they jabbed penicillin in his rump. But he was feverish and dreamed. He dreamed the face of the earth was being flooded by water. The oceans were hurled every which way as though by a gigantic hand. He woke up and dreamed again but this time it was real. All the women were talking about it.

Tidal force.

Could it tear the earth to pieces?

Of course not, of course not. The moon would be destroyed first. There was a thing like Roche's limit. Who the hell was Roche? What was it all about? Well, if the moon got so close, just close enough, the tidal force would tear it to pieces.

Oh, don't let it happen, Mummy. Don't let it happen.

"Listen, Gretchen, I saw you kissing that horrid old man last night. Why, he must have been seventy! Get hold of yourself, Gretchen."

"Sure, but what do I do? Sit here and go nuts with all the others? Oh Olaf, Olaf, why did I have to be 4F? Why couldn't I get classified for space duty with the women's corps. Bad kidneys hell. I'm as good as any man. Oh Olaf, why couldn't I have had your baby... just one?"

● IT WAS MUMMY'S TURN.

"We're going to play games." She was thin and grey-faced and didn't look at all well. Goodygoody. Mummy was always swell. She could tell such stories. She had the softest hands, the nicest smile. She looked at all the kids and smiled. It made them all want to run hug her.

"We'll play ring-around-the-rosy."

"What! That rotten old game."

One of the bigger girls stuck her thumb in her mouth and wiggled her fingers. "Drop the handkerchief."

"Aaaah, baloney."

"I know. I know. We'll play Peace."

Peace. This was a new one. Mummy was so clever; she had their attention now.

She stood up in the cavern room. She stood tall and straight and proud. "We'll play like the war is over children," she said quietly.

"Oh goody. And we won!"

"Of course we won. Our side took the moon base."

"And the other side is too scared to wiggle."

"That's right. The other side is too scared too wiggle."

Tramp, tramp, tramp. Hear the feet stamp. Hear the rockets blast the air, cause that's the Am-Fed rockets there. On, on, on. Round and round the big room. The earth is ours. We've lots of food and...

"I want Mimi!"

Gracie simply couldn't forget her kitten. She was crying and all the play rocketmen were marching around her in a big wheel. Mummy was bending over her. "Wah! I want my kitty. Where's my kitty?"

"Oh God, when will it all end?"

"Yeow! Yeow! You hear me! Yippee!" Gretchen came running, then turned cartwheels so you could see her big bare legs. "There's a rumor. A hot one. The Am-Fed government gave it out. Council of Mon-goms just sent an offer for a truce. Peace."

"Peace. Peace. Then it isn't just play."

"No, no...but..."

That was it, the but...

Eldon wiped his chin gravely. He didn't like syn-food and said so. It left his belly empty and hurty inside.

● **IT WAS A WEEK NOW** since peace came.

But it wasn't any different. Walls of water still scurried over the planet. Wild creatures that had died floated in and bloated and stank. At last when the rations were stretched to the limit, a scarred airship came, manned by women. They weren't cheerful.

"I'll bustem. I'll breakem in two. Yes sirce, Bob."

"My name ain't Bob. It's Josh."

"Well, Josh," said Eldon, eyeing a new playmate. He picked up a stick that was nothing but a splinter. The hurricane had wrenched it from the rest of the tree. "I'll break that ol' Heavyside Layer...right in two."

"Like heck you will, bub. It's way up there."

"Up where?"

Josh tapped Eldon's shoulder with his fist.

"Right straight up. A thousand miles maybe."

"Then I'll get an airplane."

"Nope. Not even rockets," said Josh, hitting him with his fist again. "Just goes right through. But no radio wave. can make it. Course they sent a spaceship to tell them peace is declared. But it'll take eighteen days...to get to them...before they stop fighting..."

Eighteen days.

Eighteen ... seventeen ... sixteen ... fifteen...

A day can be eternity. Only one little day ... fourteen ... thirteen ... twelve...eleven...

The radio must be wrong, of course. There were only weak scat-

tered signals. All of the big cities were gone. Big ones, little ones, country hamlets, distant crossroads...

"I'll be Daniel Boone."

"Old Kit Carson. That's me." Josh was rough, but he was really a lot of fun. "And that Gracie, we'll find her scalped by Indians and tied to a tree."

Gracie started to run, but Josh had her. He twisted her arm behind her. The hand that held a doll opened. The doll fell face down into the sand. When they scuffled they tramped on the doll.

"Let her go!" screamed Eldon. "You hear me. Let her go." He danced in a frenzy and rushed into the fray.

Josh hit him right in the eye. Somehow Eldon's hands clawed out and grabbed the scrawny throat. When Josh fell his hold was jarred loose but he wrapped his legs around Josh and kept wriggling till they were up around his neck. Gracie was lying on her side, scratching and biting like a wildcat and old Kit Carson Josh was a thing to look at when they got through. A scissors did it. Good old scissors. Just like the wrestlers on TV used to do.

● **IT'S WRONG TO FIGHT,"** said Mummy later.

"But daddy's fighting."

"Well...maybe it's me that's wrong. Oh dear...eight days more ...and they're still fighting."

Seven...six...five...

Tidal force, wrenching at the earth, twisted the oceans out of their beds. But it was all because of the bombs, slowing the moon in its orbit, pushing it in closer and closer.

Eldon heard someone say that a million of our side had died. Two million of the other. On the black side of the moon the space rockets were meeting with a terrific display of force. H-bombs and A-bombs and the new X-bombs fell like rain. And every explosion pushed the moon closer to earth like a jet.

Roche's limit! A point where tidal friction would tear the satellite apart. But the soldiers of space didn't know. Those armies up there

fighting couldn't know. They knew how to die. They knew what it would mean to hold Moon-base. The winner could sit up there in Crater Copernicus and spit atom-bombs at the earth like paper wads. He could blast any city out of existence, any at all, with the slightest effort.

The Ark was like that. Ever hear of the Ark? Oh, do tell us about it, Mummy. Do, do.

It was a big houseboat that floated on water. The animals went in two by two.

"Tigers?"

"Yes."

"Elephants?"

"Yes."

"Camels?"

"Yes."

"Cats and dogs, and...mice and frogs..."

"Oh yes, yes. They all went into the ark and..."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you laugh, Josh," cried Mummy. He was over by the space-window. He was looking through bomb-proof plasticite. There was a weird reflected glow on his interested face.

"Old funny-face. He finally got it."

"Listen to me, children. Josh is a rude boy. Noah herded all the animals into the ark. Then he took his people in, and they went to a mountain top."

"Like this mountain top?"

"Yes, I am sure that it was much like here. Only it wasn't the same mountain."

"And it rained."

"Yes, it rained, and rained and rained."

"And the wind blew. Whole cities were drowned and..."

"Oh in Heaven's name!... Sorry, Children...yes, it rained and the wind blew and the water came in big waves and swallowed up the cities..."

"I knew old funny-face would get it," said Josh gravely, nodding his head up and down.

"What's up?" asked Eldon. He hadn't wanted to be rude and hurt Mummy's feelings, but with Josh

looking up like that he couldn't help feeling a stir of curiosity.

"One more day would have done it," said Josh. "They didn't make it in time."

● **EVERYTHING WAS AS** still as death.

It was as quiet as if the winds and torrents had laid down, but of course they hadn't. Everyone went and crowded to Josh and looked up with him.

"What is it, Mummy?"

Mummy said, "Oh, Gerald. O dear God in Heaven, have mercy. Help them in their peril."

The big moon was breaking like ice. The pieces were separating and getting farther and farther apart. A great radiant glow hung about the ragged pieces, a light that was like an evil light. It was so slow and beautiful it was like a dream. The children laughed and cried and then laughed again.

"Hi diddle diddle," yelled Josh.

"The cat and the fiddle!"

The children all joined in. Oh, but it was fun!

Hi diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. The little dog laughed to see such sport and the dish ran away with the spoon.

But it was so obvious. The cow hadn't leaped over the moon. She hadn't made it. She had hit the moon and it was coming apart.

Now we got a chance to see if it is made of green cheese. Haven't we, Mummy?

Peace! Let's play peace.

Ten million men. Poured down a radiant hole that was blasted in space. Am-Feds alone. Ten million men and women of the Space Corps. And the waters came, and they rose over the face of the earth and the billions died and...

"Helen, don't do it. It hurts me, Helen. You're crazy, I tell you. Don't do it."

Gretchen was mad at Mummy. Mummy was at the head of the little group of play rocketmen going round and round the cave room, all pointing upward at the moon which

was just a big cloud of silvery fragments that were scattering every which way.

Stamp, stamp! Was that the patter of little feet? Or fragments of the moon, already striking earth in a torrent of shooting stars?

"Hello," called Eldon. "I'll be Commander."

He played like he was head of the whole shebang, at the same time hearing Josh make the same declaration.

TRAMP, TRAMP, HEAR THE feet stamp. Feel the rockets shake the air, that's the Am-Feds blasting there. Oh what fun! Mummy led them through a huge doorway and out onto the mountainside. Just as if they were really and truly the people who had grown up to take over the world. Just as if they could with their own small hands reach down into the earth and gravel with nothing but empty palms and start to build it all over again.

A million fragments spread in the sky. The giant, silvery, 4th-of-July rocket boomed and broke overhead and the children shouted with glee.

It fell to earth and the radiation came, destroying all life.

But what if they were the only ones left, after all? The only kids on earth! They'd be Ab, the cave-man, and the Neanderthal man crouching on a hillside, and the shaggy-haired man of the dawn of time, and the apeman roving through the wilderness. Gosh but it was fun, this new game. Why, they could build up the earth in no time at all. They'd start from scratch, by zing! ...and it wouldn't take long.

Out of the sky a glistening fragment fell. A long finger of radiation reached out, tagging them lightly. As the aura lingered the children lay down drowsily as though for deep slumber.

Gosh no, it wouldn't take long, just a few hundred centuries, or a thousand hundred million years. Or even an aeon maybe. It wouldn't take long, really, actually, truly, for the earth to build back from the simple life-spores after the radiation was gone. An aeon is such a little while.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

THE BIG news, this time, is the revival of *Science Fiction Quarterly*, the initial issue of which will be on sale by the time you read this page. You will find stories there by the same authors who appear in *Future*, as well as by some whom you have not seen here as yet. As with *Future*, the policy of *Science Fiction Quarterly* will be broad enough to include all kinds of science fiction, and narrow enough to exclude the juvenile. Let's hear from you about this first issue.

A reader writes in to express disappointment at not seeing editorials in *Future*. There are two reasons for their absence: (1) I'm handling quite a few other books besides the two science fiction titles, and haven't the time. (2) As I've indicated before, my scientific background isn't vast. I don't believe in sounding off unless I think I know what I'm talking about, and/or think what I have to say is worth someone else's while reading. And most scientific matters are *not areas for opinion*; as one of my esteemed colleagues, who generally knows what he is talking about, and has something to say worth reading

on scientific matters, notes—you can have opinions about matters of agreed definition, or unsettled definition, but no one's *opinion* about verified events—scientific facts—means a damn. That is, for example, the question of the existence of what we have agreed to call "gravitation" isn't open to discussion of whether "this applies to me". You have a legal right to think it doesn't, but this won't help you much if, in pursuit of such a "right", you jump off a high building without adequate preparation for falling.

Thus, no regular editorial in *Future* or *Science Fiction Quarterly*. You may see one occasionally—and then, you may decide that my former silence was wise.

Don't forget to indicate your choice for the most interesting letter in "Down to Earth"—if you're in a mood to vote on such matters, that is. Leo Louis Martello was the favorite in our January issue, and an original is on the way to him. And, about "Down to Earth": if you wish to continue the discussion of Dianetics—well, it's your department. But I hope we can discuss other matters, too. After all there are other things.

RWL

"A" as in Android

by Milton Lesser

The dancing girls fit the descriptions of androids, and that settled it, so far as Carmody was concerned. It also settled Carmody . . .

IT WAS ONE hell of a place for a nightclub. But then, Saturn's seventh moon, Hyperion, would be a hell of a place for just about anything. Oh, Government had done wonders—and spent fortunes—giving tiny Hyperion a warm, breathable atmosphere and earth-norm gravity. Outside of that, the jumble of rocky crags and powdered pumice might have been the space side of Pluto. I know, because I've been there.

Now I heard the anxious stirring among the tough space-hands and miners as they waited for the first wonder of the Saturnian System—Hyperion's Dancing Girls. You couldn't blame them. Girls were girls, Andies or not, and the female of the species was about as common out here as an aardvark.

But frankly, I was more than a little sore at the over-patriotic deck-hand who had reported the existence of the Dancing Girls to Tycho City on Luna. It meant I had to traipse almost a billion miles to collect the tax. If the Dancing Girls were an-

To a mouse, "cheese is cheese"; that's why mousetraps generally are effective. And for those who are satisfied with dictionary definitions of objects, events, etc., people-traps can be effective, too — people-traps based on the same kind of identification that snags indiscriminating mice.



droids; if their maker had the money; if someone didn't put an end to the whole affair by deciding that a knife in my back might be distinctly better than paying a hundred bucks per head...

I saw those Dancing Girls. Let me tell you about them briefly. No, I won't go into detail. I remember they got my mind off all those morbid thoughts out in Hyperion City, and I don't want my mind to stray now, not while I'm trying to tell you this story.

They came out, about a dozen of them, and they danced. There wasn't a sound in the Hyperion Club. Not even music. Not even breathing. I've never seen anything like it. And it took me a while before I realized just why those tall slim girls were so graceful. Well, graceful isn't quite the word, but then, no word exists in any language I know which can describe the something-more-than-grace which those girls had. They danced. All other dancing was mere walking, stumbling, clumsy tripping.

They had long legs. Not so you'd say they were nice long-stemmed chicks, but really long. Half again as long as they should be, or maybe more. But on them it looked good.

That clinched it. They were Andies, a dozen untaxed androids. I sighed and hoped the owner had his tax-money. I didn't want to impound these Andies for the government, not these dancers.

WHEN IT WAS OVER I didn't hear a sound. No clapping, no roaring, no stamping of feet. Not even shouts for an encore. Anything would have been superfluous.

I got up. I took my time walking across the now empty dance floor to a door which was marked, quite plainly, *Keep Out*.

I didn't. I walked right on through and a big guy with a seamy face stood in front of me, shaking his head slowly.

"Move, friend," he said; "can't you read signs?"

I told him that although I was not a college boy I could read, and

would he please get out of my way because I had official business with the owner of the Hyperion Club. All he knew how to do was shake his head, but when I showed him the card in my billfold with the big letter *A* on it, the motion of his head changed. Now the seamy face bobbed up and down, but it looked worried. There's one thing about being in the Android Service—it sure can open doors for you.

Seamy Face ushered me through a corridor and down a flight of stairs. He only paused long enough outside a metal door to knock, and then I followed him inside.

The card on the desk said, *Mr. Tuttle; Manager*, and behind his thick-rimmed glasses Mr. Tuttle looked like he had insomnia. A little guy, and tired. He just wasn't cut out for the frontier. Maybe he should have had a curio shop in Marsport.

Seamy Face said, "This guy's from Android Service, Mr. T."

Tuttle looked up unhappily. He waved me over to a chair and I sat down, taking out my card again. "Carmody's the name," I said. "That's a nice act you have out there, Mr. Tuttle. Very nice. In fact, I've never seen anything like it. Androids?"

He didn't answer the question, not right away. Instead, he said in his tired voice: "A lot of people think so. Orders are beginning to pour in from all over the outworlds. There'll be thousands—"

I cleared my throat. "Andies will cost you exactly a hundred dollars a head, Mr. Tuttle. You know that, of course. What I want to know is this: why didn't you report the manufacture of your androids to the government? There's a reason for it, and for the tax, too. It isn't legal to upset the balance like this."

Tuttle sounded so tired I thought he'd fall right over into a deep sleep any moment. He said, "Who told you anything about androids? What makes you think they're androids?"

I smiled. "No stilts," I said. "Don't tell me they're wearing stilts. It's either that or androids, Mr. Tuttle."

Tuttle didn't answer that one either. Instead, he asked a question of his own. "How would you like

to earn five thousand dollars, Mr. Carmody?"

I told him that was my year's salary, exactly, and I'd love it. Only I had a funny suspicion that whatever the offer was, I'd have to turn it down. Maybe we honest guys are fools; maybe ten years from now I'd still be earning exactly five-thousand, but at least I'd be able to live with myself. I'm no saint, but I've got a conscience.

"All you have to do," Tuttle said, "is this. Go back where you came from and say my dancers are not androids—for five thousand dollars, utterly no strings attached."

I asked him what I thought was purely a rhetorical question. "Are they androids, Mr. Tuttle?"

He was always answering a question with one of his own. "Define your term, Mr. Carmody. What is an android?"

I felt a little silly, and I said: "Why don't you ask your friend here?"

Seamy Face brightened. He said, "Well, an andie is kinda like a person, only it's made in a laboratory, not born. You know—chemistry, not biology." Seamy Face was very proud of his answer.

"Does that satisfy you?" Tuttle wanted to know.

I told him it did, and he said: "In that case, Mr. Carmody, I can assure you that Hyperion's Dancing Girls are not androids."

• I JUST SAT THERE, hardly hearing Tuttle repeat his five thousand dollar offer. It didn't sound like he was lying, yet the whole situation smelled fishy. "Maybe you ought to let me see one of the—uh, girls," I told him.

"I wouldn't advise it, Mr. Carmody."

"Nah," Seamy Face agreed. "Better stay happy, friend."

"I'm stupid," I said. "I don't know when I'm well off. I want to see one of them."

Tuttle shrugged, pressed a button on his desk. "Tara, that you? Will you come in, please?"

I didn't have long to wait. In a few moments the door swung in, and

the Dancing Girl closed it softly behind her.

She wore a pair of big gold earrings, with her long hair swept back and hanging half way down to her waist. She had on one of those flimsy garments popular with the dancers these days, dark red and oddly metallic, with a bright gold sash. A lot of flesh showed, especially with those over-long legs. Android flesh, I was sure. She had an innocent face.

"What is it, Tuttle?" Nice voice, neither friendly nor hostile. Just plain nice. But no respect at all for Tuttle, the man who evidently had manufactured her.

Tuttle was sad, and afraid. "This man is from the Android Service," he told her. "I mentioned the Android Service to you, Tara. A matter of tax—"

"Why don't you pay the tax, Tuttle?" Even less respect this time. Still a nice voice, but haughty.

"I can't. You know I'm in debt, and I've been paying; I haven't got the money."

"Stupid of you," she told him, still in her nice, innocent voice. "You!" She turned in my direction, almost languidly.

"Me?" I said. Maybe Tuttle's fear was contagious, and I felt like seven different kinds of a damned fool. Only I was afraid, too.

"Yes, you. Do I look like an android?"

I looked her up and down, slowly, spending a lot of time on the graceful, incredibly long legs. I nodded.

"Yes."

That set her back for a moment. "Come here, man. Come on. I won't bite."

Woodenly, I crossed the room to her. Don't ask me why, but I was plenty scared. Ever see a terrestrial dog on Mars, in the presence of some of the Martian fauna for the first time? Don't ask me why, but that's the way I felt. Worse.

The nice voice told me, "Touch. Go ahead, touch me."

I tried to act casual. I lit a cigarette, and I had to cup both my hands tightly around the match, so it wouldn't shake.

"Do you have to do that to touch me?" she demanded.

I stuck out my hand, foolishly. I grabbed her bare arm, high up, near the shoulder. I pulled my hand away, like it had been in fire.

She smiled. "Am I an android?"

I didn't say a word, not immediately. I just stood there, looking at my hand. What it had touched was cold—oh, not frigid, like a slab of ice, but cold, say, like the glass top on Tuttle's desk. Androids are just like humans; they're not hot, not feverish, but they feel pleasantly alive because they're warm-blooded. Tara's arm had a nice, rosy color, but it was cold.

● **STRANGE NOISES CLUCKED** in my throat before I could say anything. My voice came from way down inside me, much too deep. "If you're an android, you're new. I didn't know androids could be—" "Cold?" she smiled. "Not really cold. About seventy of your degrees on the Fahrenheit scale. That's not cold. Really, I find it pleasant." She shrugged. "But then, that happens to be the temperature of this room. I vary."

"She varies," I said.

Tuttle seemed a bit happier. "Well, now that you're satisfied she's not an android, I suppose you can go home and make your report. No tax, of course."

"Of course," Tara said.

If I ever get my conscience out in front of me where I could see it, I think I would kick it. Hard. "I'm not satisfied at all," I said. "She may not be an ordinary android, but she's not human. You're tax free for the present, but I'm going to order an investigation by some technicians."

Tuttle shook his head, sadly. Tara shrugged her cold rosey shoulders. "Borden, you will take him, please."

Seamy Face didn't like the idea, but he came at me ponderously, a great big slab of a man. It occurred to me at that moment that Tuttle's five thousand dollar offer had been about as sincere as a Venusian assertion of good will. We've been warring on and off with Venus for a

hundred years. Because if Tuttle didn't have twelve hundred dollars to pay his tax, then he didn't have five thousand to pay me. Any way you looked at it, it came out murder. Or, I hoped, *attempted* murder.

Seamy Face swung a big fist which could have pulverized an adobe wall. I ducked and stepped inside of his flailing arms. They don't take weaklings for the Android Service, and I slugged away at his midsection, carefully. He grunted, and his guard came down, fast. Big men always do that. I stepped back, panting, and planted a right flush on his jaw, the way you see the Space Marines do it on video. Seamy Face shuddered and flopped about loosely for a moment, then he tumbled over on his face.

I felt cocky. "Who's next?" I demanded.

Tara's voice was still nice and innocent. "Why, you are," she said.

I should have known it would be the over-long leg. It started at the floor, long and graceful, and it moved so fast I hardly could see it. It caught me under the chin, and I think my feet left the floor. I had a quick, spinning view of Tuttle shaking his head, sadly, and then something crashed against my stomach. I remember sitting down, and I tried to get up. I could see the long legs standing over me, see the hands on feminine hips. I tried to reach out for those legs, only I never made it. . .

● **HYPERION IS ALMOST A** million miles out, and I could see Saturn with her majestic rings in the port, the size of a silver dollar held at arm's length. That was all kind of hazy and far away, but it was enough to tell me I was in a spaceship before I blacked out again. Only I didn't quite black out, or, if I did, I had one crazy dream. . .

I remember Tara and half a dozen others stripping me, peeling off the jumper and the spaceboots as objectively as you might flay an extraterrestrial animal to study its insides, leaving me in my shirt and trousers, and then carrying me. One of them, Tara again, I think, took me

over her shoulder like maybe I weighed thirty pounds, and then I remember a big bright room with a lot of machinery. I was on a table and loud noises buzzed in my ear and I felt oddly like a lot of sharp things were going inside of me. I don't mean inside my clothing—I mean inside me, all the way. My head, my chest, all over, with a gentle but outrageous insistency. Probing. Probing. Countless little knives which were very sharp. So sharp that they didn't hurt at all. So utterly sharp that I knew they wouldn't leave any marks. Provided this wasn't some kind of an impossible, drugged dream.

The next part of the dream is even crazier. I sat up, still with too much fuzziness in my head to see clearly, and someone lay on the table next to me. That someone wore a jumper and heavy spaceboots. You could tell he was dead. You could tell—

I think I screamed, or at least I tried to scream. I saw everything through a fog, but the corpse looked just like me. Down to the last detail. Through all that fuzziness I could even see the little scar on the right temple. Me. A dead me, while the live me lay back and watched.

Someone was screaming and screaming, because the knives which were so sharp that you hardly felt them were going in again, doing their work. The someone was the live me.

• “YOU FEELING ALL right now, Jones?” Tara asked me.

“My name is Carmody.” My mouth tasted like someone had rammed it full of a lot of copper coins. “Carmody,” I said again, stubbornly. I should have known I was wasting my breath.

“You want a mirror, Jones? It may help convince you.” She gave me a big hand mirror, watched me with her innocent eyes.

I looked. I was twenty-five when Tara kicked me into her dream-world on Hyperion. I looked fifty now. I didn't look anything like Mike Carmody. I had gray hair and

dull gray eyes, a very red face with tight, thin lips. Trembling, I stood up. Mike Carmody is six feet tall in his socks. Tara is a big girl, maybe six feet herself. The top of my head didn't quite come up to her nose.

Something made me look at my right wrist, the inside of it, over the big blue vein. There was a bright letter A. Half an inch high. Capital A as in “Android”... It was the law, I knew, for all androids to be so identified.

I grabbed Tara's arm and she didn't try to pull away. She had no letter A.

“You seem confused, Jones.”

“I—” I couldn't say a thing. I just sat there.

“You were made fifty-three years ago, on Ganymede. You're a mechanic by trade, and a pretty good one.”

I shook my head. I hardly felt like fighting about it, but I said, “I was born on Earth, in Chicago, twenty-five years ago. I'm an investigator for Android Service. Name's Mike Carmody.”

She smiled. “While you were asleep, Jones, we landed back on Hyperion. Here's a newspaper.” She handed the sheet to me, still smiling.

It was a newspaper, all right. The Hyperion City Gazette. I looked at the headline, and what followed.

ANDROID SERVICE INVESTIGATOR SLAIN HERE

At four p.m. yesterday, Earth Greenwich time, the body of Michael Carmody, Special Investigator for Android Service, was found in an alley connecting Dana and Bodini Streets in this city. Carmody had been slain some two or three hours before that time, in a bold daylight attack by unknown thugs who succeeded in taking Carmody's money, although his official papers were found on his person. Carmody, it is believed...

• THERE WASN'T A THING to say. I was dead and my name was Jones now, and I'd better listen to Tara.

"So you see, Jones, you obviously couldn't be this Carmody. No, not you. He's a dead man, and you're a living android. Soon we'll put you to sleep again, and when you wake up, you'll understand. I can't blame you for being a little confused now, not really."

"You mean—you'll make my mind believe that story?"

"Yes, something like that. We erase the memory waves present and put in their place certain other—memories. Simple. Why?"

I thought fast. Hell, I didn't stand a chance getting off this ship alive, but at least I wanted to know what the hell was going on. You couldn't blame me. I said, "Well, if you're going to do that, maybe you can tell me the truth now." I meant it. I was a pretty resigned individual right then and there, and I wanted to know the truth as much as a man dying of thirst would want water. Even if the truth wouldn't stay with me very long."

Tara said, "All right, Jones. I suppose it won't hurt."

"Carmody."

"Carmody, then. What do you want to know?"

"Just about everything," I said.

Her voice was still nice and innocent. "Tuttle and Borden are dead. I had no choice. So now we need you, Jones-Carmody. Carmody is dead, too. You're Jones, an android. Soon you'll think that, too."

"Yes, but—who are you? The Dancing Girls—"

"I assure you, we are not 'girls,' Carmody. You wouldn't understand. You just wouldn't, not at all."

"Try me," I suggested. I turned idly to look about the room, and my eyes took in the port first. Outside, I could see Saturn's great bulk, low in the right side of the port, and much closer, so close that it couldn't have been more than a few miles away in space, was a ship. A ship! There were spacesuits here on this boat someplace, and if I could reach one, could kick myself clear of the lock and jet out to that ship...

"...Dimensions. Interlocking, say, like two soap bubbles, Carmody. You live in one; we live in the other.

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There aren't a lot of us—perhaps a billion—and if you saw our dimension, you'd know why we like yours better. Just a question of infiltration now—and what could arouse less suspicion than some innocent, wonderfully graceful dancing girls? We'll get popular, Carmody. It's starting already; so popular that there'll be a dozen dancing girls in every nightclub in the solar system. Then, in time—"

I was hardly listening. A door opened, and one of the other Dancing girls came into the room.

"Is he ready now?" she demanded.

Tara nodded. "I guess so. Carmody, are there any other questions before you're Jones, completely? No hard feelings, I hope. And even if you have them now, you won't—not when you're Jones. You'll have the memories of an android named Jones, who was made here, on this ship, a few days ago, but your memories will go back fifty years, and you'll be loyal to us. A publicity agent for us in your spare time, a mechanic otherwise. Any ques-

tions?"

I fiddled about for a question. I needed time. If they could take themselves from another dimension and assume their present, almost-earthly shapes, if they could kill me and yet somehow not kill me, leaving my body dead in an alley in Hyperion City, but leaving me alive in the scrawny body of android Jones...

● **I HAD TO BELIEVE TARA.**

I couldn't doubt a word of it. So incredibly simple. Sure, no one would suspect a dancing girl of anything. What did you have to be afraid of?

"One more question," I said. I lifted a big bowl off the table and hurled it at her. "Just how strong are you?"

She stumbled back a few steps, trying to wipe some liquid from her eyes. She cursed roundly, and she may have been from another dimension, she may have assumed the shape of a girl here, but let me tell you she knew how to curse.

Did you think the cover was better than last issue's?

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Were there any stories in this issue you did not like?

Which letter in "Down to Earth" did you find most interesting? (Name of the letter-writer.)

Comments

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.....

The other dancing girl leaped at me, and I sidestepped. I didn't want her to grab me, not when I remembered what Tara had done that day in Tuttle's office.

I ran out the door and I kept running. Behind me, I heard feet pounding down the corridor.

I don't know where they got the ship, but the single spacesuit I found hanging on a hook looked awful old. I hoped it would be airtight, and I didn't have much time to think about it one way or the other. I stepped into the suit and took down the plexi helmet, and then someone spun me around and I saw it was Tara.

I swung my arm in a wide arc, starting from around someplace behind my back, and the helmet pounded against her face like a runaway meteor. It staggered her. The blow could have killed a man, but Tara just stumbled back a few steps, momentarily dazed.

The helmet fit in place snugly, the way it should, and I prayed again for air. Then I swung the lock door up, and I got a surprise.

There was no lock. Just cold-empty space, with Saturn far off and the other ship hanging in space like a silver dart, much further than it had been before, but still close enough to reach with the suit jets.

I sensed the air wooshing out of Tara's ship, and I smiled. Maybe my worries were over. They had to be. You don't just go walking around in deep space, even if it's inside a ship.

Only Tara did. Her damned synthetic body—or whatever the make-believe dancing girl's flesh housed, could adjust to anything, instantly. She came for me, smiling innocently, still as if almost nothing was wrong. Maybe I'd been naughty, but that's all.

I kicked off from the hull and floated away from the ship a few yards. Tara stood in the simple doorway, and I felt a little giddy. I thumbed my nose at her.

It didn't last. She lifted a blaster and fired, and then I switched my jets on and began to soar away,

darting, spinning, weaving—until I felt something like a gyroscope which lost its bearings.

The beam from her blaster zipped through space on all sides of me, but in a little while I was out of range, and by the time she could turn that ship around—even if she could withstand more gravities than a robot—I'd be in safe hands.

I smiled grimly as I swept closer to the other ship.

“LOOK,” I SAID. “PLEASE, this is the fourth time I've told my story. It's been six months since the freighter picked me up.”

The police officer shrugged. “What do you want me to do, Jones? We like to be nice to you andies—”

“I'm not an android!”

“We checked your fingerprints. There's the characteristic inverted V in the whorls. You have the android identification mark. You have your papers. Sylvester Jones, Android 1st class, Mechanic. So what do you want us to do? This Carmody guy is dead. He's buried now.”

“Please. I'm Carmody—”

“Now, listen! We're going to have to put you away, Jones. We don't like to be hard on androids, but—”

“Carmody! Carmody! That's me, damn it—”

“Now, Jones, you'd better go away. We took you to Carmody's widow. She gave you the answer. Please, Jones, like a good andie.” He frowned. “And that story you tell, better keep it to yourself. Dancing Girls invading the solar system. Ha, ha, ha...”

I stood outside in the streets of Earth. Chicago. Home town. It looked strange. I saw a billboard. “A hundred dancing girls in the Club Falcon. See them...”

The craze had swept the system. Every habitable world. Every club. They all had their long-stemmed dancing girls. Androids now, with little A's on their wrists, paying taxes properly, no questions asked. Infiltration...

★ Dark Cloud

by Richard Wilson

When a rescue ship discovers why the first didn't come back, it may be too late...

ABOARD RESEARCH SHIP NO. 2, Somewhere in Space, June 4, 2023.—I say "somewhere in space" because while I have mastered this relatively simple message apparatus, my background was such that I am left bewildered by the intricate position-computing instruments.

I can say specifically only that we're a good distance beyond Mars, but still a long way from the asteroid belt—which is no more than you already know.

I suppose I should recapitulate. This is the ship outfitted and dispatched last February by the Department of Science to investigate the black "cloud" that suddenly appeared in space and began hovering affectionately around Mars—at, however, an extremely wide orbit.

Ship No. 1, you will remember, was sent out with a similar purpose several months earlier. It sent back reports right up to the time it drew close to the cloud. Then nothing further was heard from it. One unofficial terrestrial observer said he had seen the ship enter the cloud. This evidence was rejected by the Department of Science because none of its observers had seen this happen.

I happen to know that the ship did enter the cloud; it's still there.

It isn't a cloud, of course. It's an aura of some kind, very large—about ten thousand miles in diameter—and luminous. Noisy, too. It crackles.

But more about that later. I want to tell you about the men on this second ship.

There were a dozen in the crew, all volunteers and officers in the Space Reserve. It was known to be a dangerous, possibly fatal, expedition, considering the fact that the first ship sent out had not been heard from or seen for over three months, but the men were anxious to go, probably because the trip was an invitation to adventure—a word, to

them, that had become just something in the dictionary since the World Pact.

There was a lot of informality about the whole affair. The ship is a large one, and the men were permitted to bring along a good deal of personal baggage. This term covered a multitude of things, such as a music player, a hundred or so books, a pet monkey, the impedimenta of the venerable game of baseball, film apparatus, a miniature piano and innumerable decks of cards.

After the excitement of the take-off, much magnified in importance by the hullabaloo of publicity and the crowds it brought to the port, tranquility settled over the voyage. It was routine and uneventful. Boring, in fact, as most space voyages are, after the first few hours of novelty have passed.

The course was checked hourly, meteor-lookouts were kept, daily inspection tours were made and reports were sent back to Earth every twelve hours. All quite necessary and all quite dull.

The men had much time to themselves, which they spent studying, playing games, reading, listening to music or just plain loafing.

After a couple of days, a sort of cooperative command was set up, with the men rotating through all positions aboard ship, including the captaincy. This, of course, wasn't reported to Earth.

The men were a remarkably intelligent lot. Not a moron among them—a rather unusual thing to find in the personnel of a Space Corps undertaking.

● THE SHIP STOPPED OVER

Ion Mars for two days to refuel and give the boys a chance to get rid of some of their pent-up enthusiasm in the hot spots of the big mining town, Iopa.

As if in reprisal, there was a very

dull session the next afternoon when the old fogey in charge of the Martian field office of the Department of Science got together a bunch of his scientific cronies and threw a banquet, laden with "you are the men of the future" speeches and other such fol-de-rol.

I don't suppose there is any need to explain why a Martian ship hadn't long since investigated the black cloud—in spite of the fact that it was a lot nearer Mars than Earth.

All their ships were too busy bombing the miners into a state of starved subjugation to bother with anything so un-big-businesslike as a scientific expedition.

No doubt you wonder at my temerity in saying these things. Things so obviously true but invariably cloaked in silence by those who own the mines—and the newspapers and broadcast stations.

I can hear you saying I'll be broken for this—de-ranked, de-serviced, destroyed. Permit me a laugh.

• **W**HEN MARS WAS ABOUT a week behind, the crew began to get excited. The cloud was dead ahead, getting larger every hour. It wasn't black any more, but a sort of dark gray.

Ten days from Mars the cloud blotted out everything ahead of us. Only Mars and the stars behind us gave assurance that we hadn't been transported to an alien universe.

The crew began to take observations with their instruments. The results were odd. I don't know whether you on Earth trained any cameras on the cloud, but we did. All types of camera and all types of film were used, but the results were the same. No image appeared on the plates.

The stars beyond, obscured from us by the cloud, shone clearly with no trace of the huge, though increasingly ethereal, object between.

Next we trained our sonoprobe on it, more as a gesture of completeness than anything else, for who could hope to hear anything through dead space? The result was surprising, for immediately the instrument began to crackle and snap like electricity—or lightning. It did not have the haphazard, desultory sound of light-

ning, however, but was rather an insistent, sustained sound, like the clicking of a telegrapher's key or the piercing chatter of a wireless message.

One of the fellows rigged up a recording apparatus, but when he played back the record nothing was audible but the hum of the ship's machinery and the breathing of the men.

There was a conference. They all crowded around the instruments which they began to suspect illogically of betraying them. Even the man on duty at the controls joined in. Their theories were many and brilliant. They would have been worthy of a council of scientists thrice their years, but no agreement or explanation was reached.

They were all glancing intermittently at the object of their discussion, of course, but it was not for half an hour that anyone noticed how much more swiftly they were approaching it.

Abruptly the man on the control shift ran back to check the course. He was alarmed to find that the velocity of the ship had increased a thousandfold and that it was still accelerating.

Instinctively he shut off the motors. The ship continued on its course; the acceleration increased. Furiously he threw the engines into reverse. A shudder ran through the ship, but it didn't slow its mad speed. He threw the indicator to full speed astern.

There was a near-human howl from the engines, then a report as of a thunderclap close at hand—and the engines went dead.

An examination of the engine-room showed it to be so much molten metal, thoroughly beyond repair. The explosion had done no damage to the hull, fortunately. The ship was still airtight.

A brief report was sent off to Earth, but as no answer was received no one could be sure the sending apparatus was still in order.

For the first time the men were at a loss to know what to do. There was no way of controlling the ship. Every second was bringing it nearer the cloud, now lighter and strangely

luminous. There were the life-craft, of course, but it was obvious that if this unknown force could affect the powerful motors of the parent ship, the progeny would have even less chance against it.

Presently wisps of the luminous cloud began to hurtle past the ports. Perhaps it is only coincidence, but at the same time the men began to act more at ease. In spite of the fact that they were millions of miles from home and that any ship sent out after them would evidently meet with a fate similar to theirs, the air of despondency began to drop from them little by little until they were, if not gay, at least composed, without, however, being resigned, as to a repugnant fate.

They were beginning to have an uncanny air about them, alien from their usual natures—in fact, distinctly alien—unearthlike.

One by one they stopped speaking to each other and their eyes seemed to gloss over. Their brows contracted and they seemed to look into something beyond. It was curious, as if they were suddenly less men and more gods.

At first they were all crowded together at the instruments, or at the ports, watching the ever-thickening luminous clouds race by, but now they began to drift away and seat themselves apart from each other, folding their hands or letting their arms hang at their sides, staring intently into vacancy as if each were a world to himself.

I got the impression that these men—knew.

THE CLOUDS WINGING
past the ports became thicker until they merged into one unending mass of gray brightness.

Then, for hours, the ship was drawn silently, eerily, into the vortex of the cloud.

Nothing happened. Aside from the billowing cloud outside the port, nothing moved. The men continued to sit, relaxed, silent, deep-eyed.

Once one of them moved his eyes a trifle and looked at me. Not with friendship or curiosity, but with an awareness, as if I were a book whose material shape was of no matter, but

whose text might have some message. I felt rather than saw his glance. It seemed to probe my mind and suck my thoughts from it.

For a moment I was part of him. A part of him that—how shall I describe it?—that he knew no longer, or had left behind. There was still another part of him that was separated from me as by an insurmountable barrier. Something beyond. Something finer—and sad.

Then his eyes left mine and I tumbled back into myself. But it was a new self. Before, I had merely observed. Now I understood.

I looked out at the cloud and it was no longer malignant and threatening but somehow kindred, if not exactly friendly.

I watched the cloud for some minutes without realizing that, measured against it, the ship was slowing down. Now it had almost stopped and was drifting leisurely. Abruptly there was a clank. We had bumped into another ship—the ship we had been sent out to find.

I looked into it, almost certain of what I should see when the two ports became adjacent. The crew was there, sitting in attitudes of repose, alive as the men of my ship were, but dead as they were to all normal human behavior...godlike.

THAT, GENTLEMEN, IS
what became of your two expeditions to the dark cloud. What the cloud is I don't know. *They* know, but they know much more besides, and the affairs of men no longer interest them.

Here is another mystery for your scientific notebooks, for you to puzzle over for a brief hour and forget, as you have done before and will do again.

I don't know what I shall do. There is food and water enough—and air—for a long time. All the more for me because they don't need it. They don't even breathe—these gods.

There is nothing for me to do now but end my report and sign my name, as is the custom.

I shall sign it "Chigger"—for that's what they called me. I'm only part of the baggage—the pet monkey.

Time Killer

by Charles Dye

(illustration by Luros)

The machine showed Moxel how he would die, but Moxel decided that fore-warned could be fore-armed!

MOXEL'S eyes glittered in the sullen light of the cavern. He stood expectantly in front of the cloudy, opalescent globe suspended by invisible energy poles from the crab-shaped machine below it.

For awhile, there was silence. Then the machine continued, its thoughts echoing and thundering in Moxel's brain. "I repeat, I cannot predict the outcome of the change. The sole purpose of my creation was to produce the future in miniature, for the observer to toy with as he wishes. Put on the thinking cap and concentrate on what portion of your future you wish to observe. The timebinder, becoming transparent, will reveal that portion. I am constructed so that I can say no more."

As the machine finished, a shiny metal cap, snake-like, on the end of an oily cable shot up to Moxel's side. He placed it cautiously on his head, and almost immediately, his brain felt like a pin cushion filled with hundreds of tiny needles. A cloud of pain fell across his consciousness. Reaching up to tear the cap off, his eye caught the opaque globe which was now pulsing with a reddish glow; slowly dissolving into transparency the entire cloudy sphere. The prickling stopped, leaving his brain as clear and transparent as the time binder.

Moxel voiced his thought aloud, "How am I to die?"

Simultaneously, the globe exploded into millions of iridescent pieces. Spinning madly around and around, they formed impossible planes and

"There's an old saw, 'If I knew where I was going to die, I'd stay away from the place!' But an accurate death-prediction would take this fact into account, a matter which the victim is likely to overlook."

angles that hurt Moxel's eyes and cut his thoughts to ribbons.

After what seemed eons, the squares and cubes began dropping into place. A curved horizon and uneven plane took shape, then a miniature, space-suited figure, three inches high, came into being, walking across the terrain. Moxel smiled as he recognized the figure. Just as he had suspected—it was Thorn! The grotesque hunchback, in his specially constructed space suit, was recognizable anywhere. Sometime there in the future, Thorn must be about to kill him. Well, he wouldn't wait to see it happen.

Quickly, he plunged his thumb into the transparent sphere, then slowly pressed downward into the small of Thorn's back. Jerking his head around to see what was happening, Thorn went sprawling on his face. Moxel laughed as he watched the hunchback squirming under his thumb. Applying more pressure until he felt things snap, Moxel withdrew his thumb, still laughing. He hoped Thorn was still conscious so that he could feel the intense agony of having every bone in his back and chest broken.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Moxel removed the thinking cap and watched the timebinder return to



AN ENORMOUS THUMB PRESSED DOWN

cloudy opalescence. Faintly hissing, the metal cap and cable slid back into one of the machines crab-like arms. Replacing his space suit headpiece, he stepped through the double doors connecting the strange air-filled room with the rest of the half-buried city.

Somewhat triumphantly, Moxel strode down the long, dimly lit corridor towards the tiny splash of light marking the entrance to the ruins. The weird lighting and perspective gave him the feeling that

he was walking up through the wrong end of a spy-glass, with the opening many more leagues off than it really was. The powerful echo of his footsteps was comforting and appropriate. He was on the threshold of becoming the richest, and consequently one of the most powerful, man in the galaxy—with Thorn out of the way.

• **M**OXEL WASN'T QUITE sure just when he had decided that Thorn was trying to do away with him. They been together now, for over two years; most of that time, cooped up in the survey ship, *Aris*. He knew Thorn like he knew the nose on his face. It wasn't like himself or Thorn to be careless. A reasonable number of mishaps was to be expected on a flight of this length, in such a forsaken corner of the galaxy. But ever since their landing on the fourth planet of the blue-white binary Ama, too many mishaps had occurred. All of them couldn't have been accidents; especially when coupled with the significant fact that they had discovered two dozen palladium nuggets among the ruins of one of the ancient cities near their base. Normally, they wouldn't have established a base, but this was the planet on which the star ship, *Universe* was to meet them, and take them back to earth. The *Universe* was only a month away and already had been detected on the astroscope.

When the star ship was first spotted, Thorn had laughingly said, "Well, Moxel, soon we'll be back on the green hills of earth, each with a tidy palladium fortune in his pocket. It would really be a joke if something happened to one of us now. Of course, with the entire two dozen nuggets—providing we don't find anymore—one of us could live like a king for a hundred lifetimes."

The next morning, Moxel had gone into the survey ship's laboratory to don his space suit where he had left it the night before. Upon his stepping out onto the airless world, there had been a sharp swish, collapsing him, suffocating, into a heap. It had been all he could do to reach the

airlock button, push it, and clamber back inside before he lost consciousness. Examining his suit he had discovered a ragged hole under the left armpit. Going back to the lab, he had found a broken vial of hydrochloric lying on the bench where his suit had been all night. Fortunately, they each had a dozen suits left.

Thorn had jeeringly accused him of carelessness. True, he had been careless about checking his suit; but the acid? While asleep, Thorn could have arranged the acid; already having observed that he had not been checking his suit the past few mornings. Then if the scheme did go amiss, as it had, the whole thing could be blamed on his own haphazardness. Closing the incident, Thorn had repeated his remark of the night before, "It would really be a joke if something happened to one of us now."

This morning they had split up; Moxel taking the survey ship to one side of the tiny planet, and Thorn, the smaller space boat to the other. Now, if any more palladium was found by either of them, there would be no splitting.

Moxel, even now, still found it a little hard to believe that Thorn had intended to kill him. He smiled at the thought, because Thorn was dead now—somewhere in the future.

The whole thing suddenly seemed fantastically simple to Moxel. The sealed room among the ruins; the

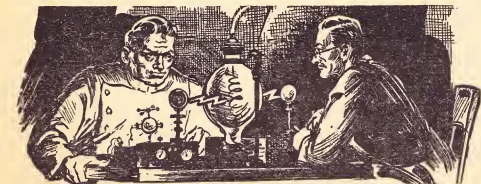
telepathic timebinder; the appearance of Thorn at his question. Of course, Moxel hadn't waited to see just how *he* was to die—why should he have? His suspicions had been correct regarding Thorn. When Thorn tried killing him at some future date, his thumb would come crushing down on him!

AS MOXEL STEPPED OUT OF the ruins, and into the survey ship, a chill went through him. He thought he sensed a tingle of sardonic laughter, coming from far below the debris of the half-buried city.

Shrugging off the uneasy feeling, Moxel removed his suit and flung it inside the space locker with the others. He could afford to be a bit careless now, with the expedition a month off, and Thorn no longer a worry. He would explain to the expedition, showing them the time binder; exactly what had happened to Thorn, and why.

In the future, once Thorn was actually out of the way, he would start worrying about being careless. But why, even then? All he need do was to pay another visit to the time binder and find out the next way he was going to die.

Again, feeling very much at ease, Moxel climbed into the control chair and pushed the energizer. As the hum of the converter cut through the stillness, he surveyed the surround-



ing terrain. Getting the ship out of the tumbled ruins, with three of the six keel tubes blown, was going to be tricky. Using the braking rock-ets, getting in had been easy; but they would be of no use, now. Thorn was right, he was getting careless. The only thing to do was to swing the ship around in the direction of the farthest object blocking his path; turn on all aft and remaining keel tubes, and hope to earth he got off before striking the pile of rubble at the end of his run.

After turning the ship into the path offering the farthest protruding resistance, he jabbed the take-off button. Responding with a lunge, the ship streaked towards the rubble, gaining precious altitude. He was going to make it—then there was a pop, as another keel tube blew; followed by a tearing screech as the debris hit the lower half of the nose, shearing off the outer keel—then blackness!

The shrill hiss of escaping air brought him to his senses. The ship, pitch dark, was lying on its side. He had been thrown out of the chair harness into the left corner of the control panel. Groggily, he realized he had better get out before he became a frozen mummy, or the gases in the keel tubes ignited, blowing up the ship. Fortunately, the space locker was only a few feet away. Stumbling twice, he reached the locker and yanked out a suit, putting it on. It seemed bulky and cumbersome, but he could adjust that later. Locking the head-piece into place, he scrambled for the port airlock, checking the suit on the way.

The moment he hit the ground, he started running and didn't stop until the ship's exploding knocked him down.

Once he had regained his breath and risen to his feet, he started laughing so hysterically he wondered if he was going mad. What a fool he'd been—all that worry and fear about getting out of the ship! If he were to have to die that way, the time binder would have shown it. He needn't worry about anything until Thorn was out of the way, in the past tense.

Regaining his composure, Moxel realized that the shock of the explosion must have registered on the pictorial seismograph in Thorn's ship. Which meant Thorn might be putting in an appearance any moment; to see what had happened, and to finish Moxel off if what had happened, hadn't. Thorn would soon spot him with the portable curve radar set.

Sure enough, glancing upward, Moxel saw the glowing tubes of the space boat. It swooped down for a landing behind a rise, now separating him from the crash.

So this was it, Moxel bitterly thought; the surrounding terrain suddenly becoming familiar as recognition clicked in his mind—the miniature landscape in the time-binder. At this very moment, Thorn must be creeping towards him. Any time now, his thumb would come forward from a few hours in the past, crushing Thorn before he could murder him.

Moxel started walking towards the rise—perhaps he would see his thumb come squashing down on Thorn—

Suddenly, a vast shadow fell across the plain, blotting out the light from the stars. An immense weight pressed into the small of Moxel's back, forcing him down with a sickening slowness, until his chest and head-piece were flat against the ragged terrain.

In an agony of pain, Moxel realized the time binder had deceived him! Thorn had never intended to kill him.

What had happened!

In spite of the razor-sharp pain in his back and chest, he managed to twist his head around—no wonder he'd had so much difficulty donning the space suit!

As the blackness of death slowly darkened his consciousness, he realized the timebinder had not tricked him after all; but had shown perfectly, himself being crushed to death by his thumb—in a hunch-backed space-suit looking like Thorn!

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Down to Earth

Letters From Our Readers
and Editorial Comment

Dear Editor:

In the September-October issue of *Future*, there was a letter from Marvin Maxwell, of Riverside Drive, that really hit the spot. In that letter, Mr. Maxwell asked a pair of very interesting questions. I would like to try to answer the second of these, the first—"What is Science Fiction?"—having no answer.

"Does matter consist of waves or particles?" That is the one I would like to take a crack at. I would think that the answer is "waves", for aren't "particles" matter? Quote Einstein: "Matter is congealed energy." Surely waves are a form of congealed energy, so I believe that matter consists of waves, as opposed to particles.

As for your great new *Future* magazine, everything was so close to perfect, it's fantastic!

Otto Kunkel
522 East 14th Street
Long Beach 13, Cal.

(Further answers and discussion will be welcome.)

Dear RWL:

The name "Fawcette" on your illustrations keeps ringing a bell. Now, I think I remember. Years ago, didn't Fawcette do science-fiction illustrating in a sort of comic-book style?

Why am I curious? Because I like this Fawcette's work, now. I like it better than I do Finlay's, and almost as much as Cartier's. You don't send much work Fawcette's way—the January issue has only two illustrations by him. I think you're overlooking a good bet.

That's my opinion. Others may not agree. The majority will have to—or should—rule. It is also my own, personal, opinion that you, L. L. Martello, Bob LeRoy, Stickney, et al, are merely angelling pinheads. One guy says, don't blame the

authors for the "destructive" element in their stories, but blame the demented reading public which demands the stuff; another guy says that this is good for people, because it gives them a safety-valve for their aggressive impulses; another guy says, it's healthy to acknowledge that humanity ain't so hot, anyway, and any alien civilization would probably be superior.

So what's that got to do with magazine editing? Boiling all that guff down, it would seem that everybody's in favor of the "destructive" theme in fiction, one way or another.

All right, personally, I like a morbid yarn—I call 'em morbid. But I do not like a steady diet of same. Placed in a well-balanced magazine, amidst a varied and contrasting content, an occasional morbid yarn stands out well and accentuates the quality of the others.

In short, there's nothing wrong with "destructive" themes, so long as constructive themes are also presented. There's nothing wrong with feeling superior, so long as you can also feel inferior. There's nothing wrong with stretching your emotions, so long as you also stretch your imagination. No strict, orthodox pattern of "good" or "bad" behaviour will afford any real understanding of any problem. And no strict, unswerving editorial policy is going to produce a magazine that pleases most of the readers some of the time.

Personally, though, I care nothing for any award-system to get good letters in a readers' column. Nor for any sort of award. And I do like sexy covers. Unclad heroines are emotionally pleasing, as is any well-turned ankle or shapely knee. I suppose I've just never been taught to be ashamed of that, I rather pity those who feel embarrassed about it. My gripe would be that your cover artists aren't very good.

Joe Gibson
24 Kensington Avenue
Jersey City 4, N. J.

(But what, good sir, might "superior" and "inferior" be, in the frame you mention? It seems to us that a general, free-floating sense of "superiority" or "inferiority", or, as most often happens, alternation between the two, is very unhealthy indeed. It's one thing to feel, "Well, I can write better stories than John Doe, even though he beats me in chess four out of five," etc. But that is much much different from merely feeling "superior" or "inferior" to John Doe. ...So far as

(Turn Page)

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our editorial policy goes, it's "unswerving" only in that we try to publish as good stories, of all types in science fiction, as we can obtain. Selah.)

Dear Mr. Lowndes:

Once again, I'm inspired to write. Your comments on Dianetics in the January, "Today and Tomorrow" feature deserves high praise, not just because they are in accordance with my own views on the subject, but because men in high psychological and psychiatric circles have proven the same.

A recent debate between L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Dianetics, and Oscar Sachs, M. D., and member of the psychiatric staff of the Mount Sinai Hospital of New York, in a popular psychology magazine, brought out the same things that you did: namely that Dianetics is still scientifically unproven; the book contained no case histories of specific emotional cures; its terminology is vague and indefinite—even some of the well-known psychological terms such as schizophrenia and "maniac", attributing the latter to Ghenghis Kahn and Alexander the Great, are wrongly used.

People are so fed up with psychoanalysts that they will jump at any new theory, scientific or not, just to rid themselves of smug, and false, superiority. The technique of Dianetics parallels that of light hypnosis: patient told to relax; counting; telling him to close his eyes until he goes into a sort of reverie, then rambles on about his various emotional experiences, the disturbing ones buried in the subconscious coming to the surface. Hubbard's theory is that when this happens, the patient is to "live happily ever after".

Since Hubbard is a gifted science-fiction writer and engineer, and since publication of his theories first appeared in a science-fiction magazine, it's not out of place to discuss them here. Quite to the contrary: many of the converts to Dianetics come from the ranks of science fiction readers, who, attracted by a new cult, and eager to be the first initiates, disregard Dianetics' unscientific basis for the thrill of helping out a new fad.

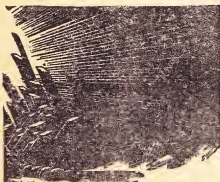
In one of your notes, you say that Henry Kuttner is not a pseudonym. That may be so, but I do know that he also writes under the names of Keith Hammond, Lewis Padgett, Lawrence O'Donnell, and several others which escape me at the mo-

ment. As for Hubbard, it's well known that he writes under the pen-name of Rene Lafayette.

I liked the entire January issue of *Future*, my favorite story being "The Genius Beasts", by James MacCreigh, although I liked all the others—especially "Afterthought", by H. B. Fyfe. Will still be hoping for short fantasy poetry, as Margaret Mead suggested in her letter. My one complaint is the cover: I wish it were more imaginative, both as to drawing and as to figures used. I don't mind the cheesecake effect, but wish the costumes and hair, at least, had been more individualistic. However, this is the artist's fault. You, Mr. Lowndes, are to be congratulated for the fine issues of *Future*. Evidently it does take supernatural insight to edit a science-fiction magazine.

Leo Louis Martello
Handwriting Psychologist
9 Hook Street
Southbridge, Mass.

(The Dianetics boys maintain vehemently that the so-called "dianetic reverie" is not hypnosis, but this is but another unsubstantiated contention on their list. So far as we have heard, (January 3, 1951), nothing beneficial has come forth from this sort of treatment that has not issued, in some cases, from various types of Freudian psycho-analysis, etc., and Mr. Hubbard's "engrams" seem to behave pretty much the same as the Freudian "sub-conscious". The one outstanding difference is the contention that all neurotic "fixations", etc., stem from experience directly connected with physical pain. Not established—but worth investigating.)



Dear Sir:

I have been impelled to write to you because of the articles about Dianetics appearing in your magazine. I am not a rabid dianetics "fan", but a person who has had
(Turn Page)

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cause to doubt the precepts of other methods to "cure" the human mind. I am not plunging into this thing with my eyes shut, nor am I taking it at face value. To me, dianetics has seemed the most plausible of any of the techniques so far investigated. I have, as yet, had no opportunity to test the function of the therapy given, but have used some of the knowledge learned, and applied its principles to myself, as far as I am able, to alleviate in some small measure some of the ills to which I seem to be heir. Your attitude anent dianetics, while extreme, is, I think, more than fair. I, for one, do object to Hubbard's method of presenting dianetics, but have no quarrel with his reasons for so doing.

I am, at present, engaged in a sampling of opinion, both pro and con, on the subject, and am cautiously feeling my way to an understanding of the subject as a whole. I would appreciate the publishing of any comment, no matter how rabid it may seem, one way or the other. The general public seems, as yet, to be almost totally unaware of dianetics. It is only a certain stratum of society that seems to be aware of it. You are, no doubt, aware of that fact. To judge dianetics without evidence of its claims, one way or another, is, to my way of thinking, utter folly. I have been in correspondence with the Foundation, and hope in the near future, to visit them, to see for myself just what are the facts about dianetics.

I have read the book thoroughly, as well as the supplementary pamphlets issued by the Foundation, and cannot, as yet, find a point on which to base a valid opinion of the subject. I would like to try the therapy technique given, to find out if the phenomena described occurs, but, being in the Army, as I am, it would be next to impossible for me to obtain the conditions required.

Please, please, publish more regarding dianetics.

Clarence R. McFarland, Jr.
Forest Glen Section
Walter Reed Army Hospital
Washington 12, D. C.

(For comment, see the letter below.)

Dear Editor:

One phrase in your comment on Dianetics, in the January *Future*, the one about

people who seem to think that "proving Freud wrong, or half-wrong, proves Dianetics right" sticks out in my memory as among the few sensible comments on the subject I have seen. This approach, along with the "consensus of opinion" approach—what do the authorities think?—seems to be one much favored by the general public on scientific subjects on the whole, and not only psychotherapies in particular.

Obviously, the only important datum is the evidence. You can't be *sure* dianetics is wrong, or half-wrong, etc., without examining it—and...where is it? One becomes suspicious, after a while, when questions are simply met with evasions, more repetitions of the original claims, or admonitions to "try it, and see for yourself—it works!" Anyone who wants to be a guinea pig has the right to be one, I suppose, but that's a far cry from taking a "treatment" under the impression that it's been established as sound.

As nearly as I can make out, it goes like this: (I refer to the contentions.)

1. All "mental ills", and many seeming organic ailments, are psychosomatic in nature, and come from "engrams".

(Turn Page)

RATINGS ON THE JANUARY ISSUE

Each letter, or preference coupon, which indicates how the stories were liked is counted. A first-place or "liked best" vote gets one point, a second-place or "liked next-best" vote gets two points, and so on. The total score is divided by the number of votes cast for each story—which varies, for everyone does not always list or comment on all the stories—to give the point rating. The lower the point score, then, the higher the story rates.

1. The Genius Beasts	2.23
2. The Everlasting Exiles	2.70
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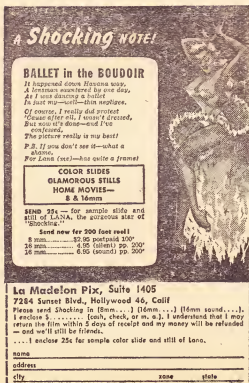
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2. The "engrams" were acquired in such and such ways.

3. They behave and function so and so.

4. They are accessible to such and such a process of therapy.

5. When the treatment is given, such and such takes place, and the patient reacts in such and such a way.

6. After intensive treatment, the "engrams" are removed, one by one.

7. The patient, when "released" from some "engrams" is partly free from various disturbances; when "cleared" is entirely free from "mentals ills", psychosomatic sicknesses, etc.

8. Point 5 has been demonstrated repeatedly in "dianetic therapy", as has the first half of point 7; it is claimed that some patients have actually been "cleared".

9. Q. E. D.—Dianetics "works".

At which point, let us interject—*hold it!* If point 5 has been demonstrated to be the case in all patients treated—and where are the records?—all it proves, at best, is that *when the "treatment" is given such and such takes place and the patient reacts in such and such a way.*

It does not prove the existence of "engrams".

There is considerable evidence that most, if not all, "mental ills" and many seemingly organic ailments are psychosomatic in nature. (Seemingly, in that the symptoms are similar to organic symptoms; examination, however, shows no trace of organic disorders which would produce such symptoms.)

This doesn't prove the existence of "engrams", either.

The "engram theory" is an interesting one. But it *doesn't* explain observed phenomena any *better* than some other psychotheories, nor does it account for phenomena unaccountable by other theories.

If people want to be guinea pigs for dianetic theories—and they *might* be offering themselves in a valuable effort—then let tests be run to see if specific "engrams" can be *induced* in the subjects (along with an adequate control group); observe *if* these "engrams" appear, *if* they behave as the book describes, *if* the subjects are then accessible to the "therapy" for removing the "engrams".

What we have, so far, is a technique for therapy, which proceeds *as if* human beings were afflicted with the so-called "engrams". What we do *not* have is any

scientific evidence for the "engram"—at least, there is none in the book, and has anyone seen any evidence issuing from the Foundation? I ask this without sarcasm—has anyone?

Meanwhile, let's try to remember that evidence for *part* of a theory does not constitute evidence for the whole works.

Jay Tyler
127 East 28th Street
New York, N. Y.

(Our impression is that Dr. Winter, and a few others, formerly associated with the Dianetics Foundation, are engaged in research on some of these basic questions, rather than giving treatments. The kind of test you describe seems requisite, but it would be a million-dollar project, we suspect.)

Dear RWL:

How very British of you—your editorial in the January issue is what I am commenting on. I think, if I were a real writer, I would prefer a scallion from you than an orchid from another, and be glad that you had taken the time to tell me. I have faith in your good judgment and impersonal, but clear and strong, opinions.

Your fourth paragraph, however, confuses me. I cannot fit that "indeed be (Turn Page)



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wonderful" into the construction of the sentence. Perhaps you will clarify that in the next issue—I hope.

There were those of us whom, having read "Dianetics", do not grasp the scientific aspect until the procedure employed by a competent auditor has been heard and observed. Semantic trickery—perhaps. Yet it is certainly reaching the multitudes and very definitely clearing up many minds heretofore cluttered with knowledge to be unlearned. I say this on the strength of having attended several meetings of the Denver Dianetics Research Council.

Much as I appreciate your views, if I had read your editorial first, some other science-fiction magazine would have gotten my money; but I saw there was a story by Richard S. Shaver, and I think some of his work is pure genius, so I had to have this issue.

Ann Brainard Nelson
225 East Huron
Chicago, Illinois

(We must confess to not having read any stories by Mr. Shaver, other than "Green Man's Grief", but that we found

this delightful, and are willing to believe that he's done others equally good, if not better. ... Having discussed dianetics above, we won't comment on your letter further, (the misprint you complain of has been amended) except to thank you for the kind words about the book reviews, and state that we *try* to be *impersonal*, so far as our opinions of the author of any book, as a person, goes. However, our stand is entirely a personal one, by which we mean that we definitely involve ourselves in these comments. One has to express personal convictions in writing on literature if one is going to stand a chance of saying anything worth anyone else's while.

Next time, perhaps we can talk about other subjects, as well as dianetics. We sent Mr. Hubbard a Christmas card, in all sincerity. The man has definitely contributed *something*, and while we suspect him to be largely in error, some of these errors may be valuable—more so than his very lucid restatements of what has already been established. Just as no one can be 100% right; no one can be 100% wrong. It's important to concentrate on what appears to be wrong, here, because so much has been claimed; but once that is understood, then it's important to find out where Hubbard is right. And I mean, correct in *his own material*. Feelings tend to be extreme about dianetics, but when passions cool, something may be found.)

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● FROM THE BOOKSHELF (Continued From Page 55)

tainment. Personally, I cannot see any particular reason for bringing this collection out between hard covers, but Doubleday has another opinion on the matter; if you want to find out for yourself, it will cost you \$2.50.

●
SIGNET BOOKS only wants a quarter (25c) for its edition of "Beyond the Moon", by Edmond Hamilton—the original, hard-cover edition title was "The Star Kings"—and this seems a more just appraisal of the book's worth. Again, we have a misleading jacket, for the tasteful picture suggests much more than you will find within. Generally speaking, I've managed to enjoy Hamilton's thrillers; despite the fact that one knew in advance how the story would shape out, it was good fun. "Gad," one says, "how's Captain Future going to get out of *this spot*?"

"Beyond the Moon" employs the same formula, but didn't hold my interest. However, it may be just my reaction; and you can only lose twenty-five cents if you find you agree with my disappointment.

Quite another thing is Signet's issue of "1984" by George Orwell. It falls into the category of social satires and "whithering", rather than science fiction

—in the field of Wells' "Men Like Gods", Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World", etc. The author expresses his views of the world in which we live, by exaggerating various tendencies and trends to their possible end-result—and what we have is a grim and horrifying portrayal of a future which is all too possible. The society of "Brave New World" was hardly enchanting, but Huxley instilled a healthy quantity of humor into his viewing with alarm. That was satire; it pointing up absurdity. But the humor of "1984" is the ghastly chuckles of the death camps—the society is ridiculous, but not in a funny sense. There is laughter, but only the sadistic laughter of the man whose sole relief is that of seeing someone tortured. It is no easy thing to maintain an atmosphere of true horror—not the make-believe terror of vampire and werewolf, etc., stories—but believable, convincing horror of intolerable living—in a fictional setting, but I think Orwell has achieved this.

And there is no honey solution. The ending is a "happy" one within the terrible limits of the situation, but the crowning blow is the realization what this "happiness" means. You won't like it, but "1984" is something not to be by-passed.

(RWL)

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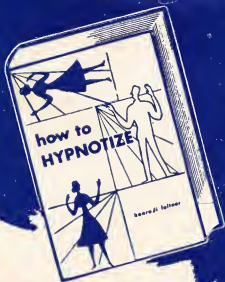
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